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FORGOTTEN REALMS®



JALEIGH JOHNSON

# UNBROKEN CHAIN

THE DARKER ROAD



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## STRANGE SPIRITS HAUNT THE SHADOWFELL PLAIN

Ilvani stood alone on the plain. She was barefoot and wore no cloak, but this wasn't unusual. What struck Ashok was her swaying stance and the knife she held in her hand.

The scream echoed again, closer, and the Guardians bared weapons.

### THEY DRIVE THE SHADOWBEASTS TO ATTACK

"Ilvani," he called.

She didn't answer. She continued to stare into the dust clouds and listen to the nightmare's screams. Cold wind gusted across the plain and blew grit into Ashok's eyes.

"Come back to the city with me. Whatever's happening, we'll help you, I promise."

"I couldn't get them out. My fault," she said. She'd slashed the long sleeves of her dress. Blood-caked scraps dangled from her elbows. Dozens of ugly cuts covered her forearms. Ashok seized her wrist—she dropped the bloody knife—to see how deep the wounds went.

"Ilvani, why did you do this? I've never seen you cut yourself before."

"You've never seen me at all."

### THEY WANT THE WITCH OF IKEMMU

Suddenly he stopped. The shallower cuts on her left arm—she hadn't made them at random. Ashok saw symbols, repetitive patterns, but they were nothing he could decipher. He started to ask her about them, but a loud scream shattered the air and made Ashok spin. He grabbed again for a weapon that wasn't on his belt.

The nightmare was almost on top of them.

### THEY DIDN'T COUNT ON ASHOK



Also by

JALEIGH JOHNSON

## UNBROKEN CHAIN

Throughout the Shadowfell live the strange shadar-kai, a people of shadow who live only as long as they can find sensations in their gray and fading lives—people like Ashok, a chainfighter. But in the city of Ikemmu are those who have learned to use their fierce need for adrenalin and danger to better their city and their civilization.

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# UNBROKEN CHAIN

THE DARKER ROAD

JALEIGH JOHNSON



**UNBROKEN CHAIN: THE DARKER ROAD**

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**W**elcome to Faerûn, a land of magic and intrigue, brutal violence and divine compassion, where gods have ascended and died, and mighty heroes have risen to fight terrifying monsters. Here, millennia of warfare and conquest have shaped dozens of unique cultures, raised and leveled shining kingdoms and tyrannical empires alike, and left long forgotten, horror-infested ruins in their wake.

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When the goddess of magic was murdered, a magical plague of blue fire—the Spellplague—swept across the face of Faerûn, killing some, mutilating many, and imbuing a rare few with amazing supernatural abilities. The Spellplague forever changed the nature of magic itself, and seeded the land with hidden wonders and bloodcurdling monstrosities.

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### **A LAND OF HEROES**

But Faerûn is not without hope. Heroes have emerged to fight the growing tide of darkness. Battle-scarred rangers bring their notched blades to bear against marauding hordes of orcs. Lowly street rats match wits with demons for the fate of cities. Inscrutable tiefling warlocks unite with fierce elf warriors to rain fire and steel upon monstrous enemies. And valiant servants of merciful gods forever struggle against the darkness.



## **A LAND OF UNTOLD ADVENTURE**



# DEDICATION

To Elizabeth, Gary and Kelly, for offering  
equal parts friendship, inspiration, and support.  
Mixed and served with coffee, of course.

*The bonds that join the shadar-kai of Ikemmu are complex and cruel at times, much like the bond between the shadar-kai and the shadows. Are they capable of strong emotions? Most certainly. Fear, rage, hope, love—all these belong to the shadar-kai, and they feel them more intensely than I've seen in most of the other races. Rage cuts deeper, love burns so brightly that it tears at the flesh. Of course they feel, but there is no gentleness to temper their emotions. If you name a shadar-kai your friend, you will have a companion to walk the darkest roads with you to the end of your days. If you can survive the pain.*

*—Tatigan Carrlock, Collected Observations of Ikemmu,  
the Year of Deep Water Drifting (1480 DR)*

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## PROLOGUE

*T*<sub>HE VILLAGE OF</sub> *T*<sub>INNIR,</sub> *R*<sub>ASHEMEN</sub>  
*4 M*<sub>ARPENOTH, THE</sub> *Y*<sub>EAR OF</sub> *D*<sub>EEP</sub> *W*<sub>ATER</sub> *D*<sub>RIFTING</sub> (1480 DR)

**T**<sub>HE BODY IS HERE,</sub> **S**<sub>ISTER,"</sub> SAID THE ETHRAN, THE VILLAGE healer. "Bhalla be merciful, the blood—"

"Be quiet," Sree hissed. "You'll wake the child. I'll not have her remember her mother this way." However, Sree did smell the blood. Behind her mask, the reek of it mingled in her nostrils with the scent of cold earth.

The house was an old stone nub set into the side of a low hill. Heather roots poked through the ceiling. Wisps of smoke and ash rose from a dying cookfire, and by the light of the gray-gold embers, Sree saw the body of Yaraella lying on her back in the corner of the main room.

Slack fingers cradled an ivory-handled knife protruding from her abdomen. The blood pool had soaked her thick brown braid and spread to the threshold of the small bedchamber Yaraella shared with her daughter, Elina.

"Wait outside," Sree instructed the ethran.

Sree stepped over the coagulating pool and entered the bedchamber. Yaraella's child was barely four years old. She slept soundly, buried underneath thick wool blankets with only her tiny nose and a thick mop of brown hair showing.

Bhalla, show mercy, Sree prayed silently, echoing the ethran's words. Let her sleep through this nightmare.

The witch lifted the sleeping child and the blankets from her bed and carried her quickly from the hut. The little girl sighed once and buried her face in Sree's shoulder. She didn't wake.

Outside, the horizon shone gray with predawn light. The air tasted of frost, and Sree's boots crunched on the white-tipped grass. Reina, the ethran, was waiting. Though she was not yet a hathran like Sree, the younger witch wore a

mask at Sree's command. Pain and grief lay heavily on the village tonight. The witches would show neither emotion.

"Take off my cloak," Sree said. "Put it around the child. Cover her head with the hood, or the frost will have her ears."

Reina did as Sree told her, and when she'd properly swaddled the child, Sree handed her off to the ethran. Removing a folded piece of parchment from her pouch, Sree read Yaraella's letter again silently. The parchment was ash-stained from lying too near the fire. Addressed to Elina, it was a short message, full of love. It would be years before the child could read it herself.

"Why did she do it, Sister?" Reina asked. "She left her child behind, alone in the world."

"She is no more alone than you or I," the hathran said calmly. "Elina will be cared for. I'll see to it myself."

"But will she be like her mother?" Reina stroked the child's back. "Bhalla forbid such a thing, if death be the result."

"We must not let it happen," Sree said. Squinting in the dim light, she thought she saw something in the child's hand. She folded back the hood of her cloak to see. The child clutched a small square object against her chest.

"What is it?" Reina asked. "A doll?"

Sree shook her head. "It's a box." Gently, she worked it from the child's grip. The box was made of dark wood with purple heather flowers painted on the lid. Sree opened it and peered inside.

"What's in it?" Reina asked.

"Nothing," Sree said. No cherished treasures, no memories of the life the little girl had shared with her mother. Sree gripped the box tightly and then slid it into the pocket of the child's sleeping shirt. "Whatever was in it is gone now."



*I*KEMMU, *THE* *S*HADOWDARK

4 *M*ARPENOTH, *THE* *Y*EAR OF *D*EEP *W*ATER *D*RIFTING (1480 DR)

Ilvani fell asleep in her bed surrounded by carved wood and stone boxes, glass spheres, and even rags hastily bound with string—anything that would hold memories. Precious creatures they were, but easily lost. She had to keep them confined, or they would fly away on the wind. She'd already lost too many.

Ilvani dreamed, and in her mind, she gasped at the vision rising before her eyes, a landscape she'd only ever beheld in books and paintings. She saw a vast pine forest in shades of deep green, the ground covered in snow. Clouds veiled the winter sun. What light there was reflected diamond bright off the snow. She stood on a path that wound through the trees and disappeared into shadow.

She walked barefoot, wanting to feel the cold, soft snow beneath her feet, but the dream denied her these sensations. The air was full of silent expectancy. Without knowing how, Ilvani understood that someone waited for her here.

A white rabbit appeared in front of her. When it saw Ilvani, the creature hunkered down in the snow, pressing its body flat against the ground until only its black eyes were distinguishable from the white blanket.

Ilvani stepped forward and extended her hand to the creature. The rabbit jumped up on its hind legs, nose twitching, and vanished.

"Where did you go, little snow rabbit?" the dreaming Ilvani said. Her words turned to fog on the air and disappeared. Another memory gone, but that didn't trouble her. Only the vital ones were worth catching.

"Will you help me?"

The voice drifted down from the pines. Ilvani looked up and saw a young woman perched on a bare branch. Her tattered wool skirt bunched underneath her, exposing legs blue with cold and feet as bare as Ilvani's. A thick brown braid lay against her neck. Her face was the color of the snow.

Humans are so beautiful, Ilvani thought, but this one's eyes give her away. They were glass spheres, black like the snow rabbit's but empty.

"I can't help you," Ilvani said. "You're dead."

A trickle of blood ran down the woman's leg behind her knee. It dripped from her heel and made a bright stain on the snow.

"Won't you help lift me down?" the woman pleaded. Her dead eyes filled with tears. She reached for Ilvani with strong, solid arms, arms she should have been able to use to lift herself down from the tree.

Ilvani looked at her own arms. They were thin gray sticks, kindling from a dead fire. They had power but no strength. She already knew their limits. In a dark hole in the ground, she'd been tested and failed.

Involuntarily, she touched her hair. The pale red strands had grown back, but they were still uneven, wild. It sickened her to run a comb through them. The comb always turned to fingers, and the fingers reeked of dirt, sweat, and her blood.

Ilvani dropped her hand to her side and waited until her trembling body calmed.

Memories were strange and malicious creatures. The cruel ones refused to fade, and she'd never found a box that could hold them.

"Are you all right?"

Ilvani had almost forgotten the dead woman and her rabbit eyes. The dream went on without her. If she wanted it to end, she must play her part.

She stepped to the foot of the pine tree and raised her gray arms. "Give me your hands," she said. "I'll help you, snow rabbit, but then leave me alone."

The woman clasped Ilvani's forearms. A shock, like a spell gone awry, shot into her chest. Gasping, Ilvani dragged the woman from the tree, and they fell, stumbling, into the snow.

Except it wasn't snow. Ilvani looked around and beheld the vastness of the Shadowfell plain. Purple lightning cut the

horizon, and the cloud scud seemed to fall out of the sky and drift along the ground. A dust storm approached.

"Where are we?" the woman asked. She sounded frightened. She reached for Ilvani's hand, but Ilvani slapped it away. "Can't you help me, please?"

Her voice was a needle in Ilvani's skin. Pleading, crying, begging—none of it did any good. Help yourself or die.

Shaking her head furiously, Ilvani suppressed a cry of her own. She wanted to go away, to hide in that safe place in her mind—the place where she made no memories. Her dreams never let her. In dreams, she faced everything.

"Look at the sky!" the woman cried, pointing to the horizon.

Ilvani looked, but she didn't understand what she saw. The dust storm bore down on them, but at its center was a calm space, an eye in the vast, deadly squall. Within the eye a darkness formed, growing arms, legs, and a head. The dark figure walked toward them across the plain and dragged stinging, slashing death behind it.

"Run," Ilvani said. She grabbed the woman by the shoulder and tried to turn her, but the little rabbit sat rigid in the grip of her own fear. The wind whipped up in a vortex, snatched the woman's braid, and began to pull her bodily toward the eye of the storm.

"Help me!" the woman shrieked, grabbing for Ilvani. The women locked arms again, but the force dragging them was immense. Yet it did not pull at Ilvani. The figure in the storm didn't want her. It wanted the little snow rabbit.

A red stain soaked the front of the woman's dress. Ilvani felt the lifeblood flowing out of her. The woman whimpered in fear and pain.

"Hold on!" Ilvani cried, but her voice got lost in the roaring wind. It didn't matter. Her grip faltered, and the woman's hands, slick with fear sweat, slipped down her arms. She screamed and screamed, but the storm tore her away from



Ilvani. She flew through the air like a flailing doll and disappeared into the dark figure's arms.

The weight released, Ilvani fell to the ground. The woman's blood covered her arms. She didn't have time to wipe it off before the storm was upon her. The dust covered her body, blinding and choking her.

Ilvani woke and screamed. She clawed at her hair and eyes, trying to scrape away dust that wasn't there—more than dust. There were symbols, words whispered in a language she'd never heard before. They crawled over her skin, her ears, and into her mouth. She tried to speak, and the words that came out were in the same language. What was she saying? She screamed again and reclaimed the shadar-kai tongue.

Fully awake, Ilvani looked down at herself. Blood streaked her palms where she'd dug sharp nails into her skin. One of her boxes, the Ashok box, lay in her lap. While she slept, her hand had instinctively clutched it. Unlike the others, this box contained something more than memories. It held tattered remnants of parchment and ashes—tools that had helped save a life.

There was no dust storm, no snow rabbit. For a breath, all seemed right and normal—as normal as could be expected. Then she widened her gaze and realized she was not in her room at Tower Athanon where she'd fallen asleep.

She was on the Shadowfell plain.

Cold wind whipped at her hair. The ground beneath her was unforgivably hard, and her body ached from lying on it too long. Had she walked all the way out here while her mind slept?

The landmarks around her, the rock crags, and rutted caravan paths, looked familiar. She knew she wasn't more than a mile from the portal to Ikemmu. The guards must have let her pass, thinking her awake and aware, perhaps on an errand for the city. She'd often made such journeys, but that was before her capture....

Ilvani cradled the Ashok box between her hands. It hadn't come open. The memories were still inside. She could picture them, if she closed her eyes. She saw Ashok's face.

The snow rabbit was there too. She heard the woman's screams as she flew away into the storm. Ilvani hadn't been able to stop it. Her strength had failed her again.

Ilvani stretched out on the ground with her ear pressed against the earth. She wished her brother, Natan, were here. He would have led her back home, stayed with her until she fell asleep. He would have held the storm at bay.

But Natan was dead, and the storm was still coming. She smelled the dust rising from the dry plain. The wind whispered to her in that same incomprehensible tongue echoing in her mind. She heard it in the earth. Symbols danced in front of her eyes, pictures she'd never seen before, images she couldn't banish from her thoughts.

To escape the sounds, the symbols, and the storm, she went to that safe place in her mind, the space of oblivion she'd created to cope with her mad world.

All the while Ilvani held the Ashok box in her hands.

# CHAPTER ONE

*I*KEMMU, *T*HE *S*HADOWDARK

*5 M*ARPENOTH, *T*HE *Y*EAR OF *D*EEP *W*ATER *D*RIFTING (1480 DR)

**Y**OU CAN'T KILL A GHOST."

Ashok appeared on Ikemmu's vast guard wall and whipped his spiked chain above his head. Flesh and feeling returned to his incorporeal body, and he brought the weapon slashing down to tangle with a pair of bright katars.

The owner of the deadly push-blades, Cree, used them to drag Ashok to the edge of the thirty-foot wall. The dizzying height would have terrified a human, but Ashok and Cree were shadar-kai. Dancing close to the edge got the blood pumping in Ashok's veins and brought a surge of energy to his limbs. He let Cree pull him almost to the brink before he abandoned his weapon and dived for Cree's legs to unbalance him.

As usual, the young shadar-kai was quicker. He yanked his katars free of the slack chain and jumped aside. Swinging overhand, he aimed for Ashok's exposed neck, but he stopped the blades before they cut flesh.

"I've seen that trick before, remember?" Cree spoke the words haltingly. He was out of breath, as was Ashok.

Ashok rolled over onto his back and kissed the edge of Cree's katar. "You have a good memory." He sprang to his feet. "But someday I'll get to you before those blades reach my neck."

"Keep boasting," Cree's brother, Skagi, drawled from a few yards down the wall. "Only way to slow that one down is to hack off his legs."

"Don't worry. Even crawling, I'd still outpace you, Brother," Cree said cheerfully. He sheathed his katars.

Ashok watched the brothers exchange insults, but he had to agree with Cree. The two brothers couldn't have been more different in their builds and fighting styles. Cree was smaller and wiry. He kept his close-cropped brown hair shaved at the temples to display a pair of curved blade tattoos. When he fought, he aimed to end the battle quickly, before his opponent had a chance to feel the blade slip between his ribs.

Skagi was his brother's opposite. Built like a block of stone, Skagi towered over most of his opponents and used blunt force to bring them down. A field of green tattoos covered the exposed upper half of his body, a wild forest that depicted chains and spikes wound together. His scarred lower lip gave him a grisly smile that his enemies rightly feared.

"What about it, Ashok?" Skagi said. He drew his falchion. "Did this pup take all the fight out of you, or are you ready for a real match?"

Ashok stood at the edge of the wall. The cave breezes ruffled his long gray hair. Beneath his bone scale armor, sweat cooled on his skin. His heart still beat wildly from the force of the sparring match. Tense muscles demanded an outlet for the energy. He wanted to take on both brothers. He'd done it once, not far from this same spot, when he'd first come to the city of Ikemmu. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Taking deep breaths, Ashok reined in the wild impulses shivering through his body. Asserting that deep control was its own kind of pain, as sharp and reviving as a dagger slash to the skin but not nearly as damaging. Ashok used that pain the way all shadar-kai must—to stay alive.

When he was in control of himself, Ashok grinned at Skagi. "Another time," he said. "Neimal wants us." He pointed down the wall behind Skagi, where a shadar-kai witch clothed in gray and black robes stood surrounded by guards. She gestured to them imperiously.

Neimal was visible from any point on the wall by the sword she held in her hand. Purple fire danced along the blade, reacting to the portal set into the cavern wall several yards away. Strangely, Neimal had not yet activated it to admit the caravan that approached the city from the Shadowfell above.

As he followed the brothers to where the witch stood, Ashok looked out over Ikemmu, the city of towers. Four spires rose in the distance: the towers Makthar, Pyton, Hevalor, and Athanon. His gaze lingered on Athanon, the soldiers' house and the domain of Uwan, the city leader. Though the city appeared calm, with the shadar-kai and the trader races mingling as usual, Ashok felt an inexplicable restlessness, as if the city itself were waiting for something. He didn't know what it was, but he'd sensed the feeling grow over the past several tendays.

Cree nudged him. "Something wrong?"

Ashok forced a careless grin onto his face. "Afraid you might have bruised my tender neck?"

Cree scoffed. "You know I'm not. You look weary, and you haven't been weary for eight months. What's wrong?"

Ashok's smile turned rueful. He'd forgotten that Cree was often more perceptive than his brother. "Last night, I had strange dreams."

"What sort of dreams?" Cree asked.

"I don't remember," Ashok said. "But I thought I heard someone screaming...."

Cree's expression reflected Ashok's concern. "Do you think it's the nightmare?"

Ashok felt an involuntary surge of excitement at the mention of the demon horse he'd trained and released back to the Shadowfell. "I don't see how," Ashok said. "As you said, it's been eight months since we saw the beast."

"Maybe you should ask Uwan about it," Cree suggested.

"Uwan has more important things to worry about than what goes on in my dreams," Ashok said.

Cree started to reply, but Ashok motioned him silent. They were within earshot of Neimal and the other guards on the wall. The witch looked more agitated than usual.

"The caravan is overdue," she told them. "The guards at the upper portal sighted a dust storm coming fast across the plain. They believe the caravan is somewhere in the middle of it."

"Send a patrol out after it," Ashok said. "If we can get to them, we can guide them through."

"No," the witch said. "If you get turned around in the storm, you'll end up as lost as they are. Tuva and Vlahna lead the caravan; they know to dig in and wait out the dust. We will wait for them."

Ashok wanted to argue. He relished the idea of pitting himself against the fierce dust storm, but he knew better than to cross the Sworn of the Wall. He suspected Neimal hadn't forgiven him for eluding her and her guards during his attempted escape all those months ago. Now that he held the rank of Guardian, he could come and go as he pleased, but he was still wary around Neimal.

Suddenly, the witch stiffened, and her black eyes lost focus. Ashok stepped forward, but Neimal raised the flaming sword, warning him off.

"Don't touch her," Cree said. "She's connected to the minds of the guards at the portal. If you distract her, she won't thank you for it."

Skagi chuckled. "He means she'll cut you into tiny pieces."

"The caravan is here," Neimal said. Her voice sounded strained. Her head jerked, and she swung her blade up involuntarily, as if attacking a ghost.

"What is it?" Ashok demanded, losing patience.

"The shadows have broken free," Neimal said. "Cages are empty—they're attacking out of the storm." The witch drew a shuddering breath.

"What's she talking about?" Skagi said.

“The shadow beasts,” Ashok said. Whatever the caravan captured—the beasts must be loose. He turned and sprinted for the gate. “Open the portal!” he shouted to Neimal.

He didn’t see the Sworn raise her sword, but the keystone at the top of the portal arch glowed, illuminating the sword of Tempus, god of war, carved upon it. The portal activated with a flash of purple radiance.

The warriors closest to the gate teleported to the ground and ran for the portal at Neimal’s shouted command. Ashok joined them. He and three other shadar-kai still in their incorporeal forms were the first to reach the arch. Ashok didn’t wait to see if Cree and Skagi followed him. He knew the warriors would be close at his back. He waited for his body to take on substance again, unlooped his spiked chain, and charged through the portal.

He came out on the Shadowfell plain into the remnants of the dust storm. Wind gusts ripped across the dry, cracked earth, blinding him with choking grit. The portal guards were nowhere in sight. Ashok pulled up the hood of his cloak and lifted his tunic to cover his mouth and nose. To his left, not far away, he saw an overturned wagon, its wheels spinning and its contents scattered over the ground. Spare wagon wheels, horse tack, tent cloth, and weapons lay everywhere, some splashed with blood. Beyond that was an empty iron cage used to house the shadow beasts for transport. Two of the shadar-kai caravan crew used it as cover. The guards from the wall ran over to them, but Ashok stayed where he was.

In the distance, indistinct shapes loomed on the plain—more wreckage and the curled-up humps of corpses—but some of the shadows moved, prowling the remnants. Ashok gripped his chain and started toward these.

“Watch behind you!” a voice cried out—one of the caravan guards. Ashok spun, but there was nothing there. The dust was too thick to see beyond a few yards.

In that breath, Cree and Skagi burst through the portal, weapons drawn.

"How many are there?" Ashok called to the caravan guard.

The man stood up, and from his bearing, Ashok knew he must be one of the caravan masters, Tuva. The other guard, a woman, rose up beside him. Vlahna.

"Four spectral panthers," Tuva told Ashok. "They're like ghosts—they come out of nowhere in this damned dust."

The man had a loud, deep voice that Ashok heard clearly over the roar of the wind. Darker than most shadar-kai, he had broad shoulders and wore a heavy suit of shadowmail that made his upper body look all the more massive.

Standing next to him, the woman looked like a child. She had short white hair that the wind tossed around her face. A solid band of tattoos covered her eyes like a mask and tapered down her cheeks in the shape of spiked chains. She carried a weapon similar to Ashok's, but she'd wound the spikes around her left arm, which was covered in reinforced bands of brown leather, in addition to her armor, to protect her flesh.

"You're the only ones left?" Cree said. Ashok heard the tension in his voice. He knew Cree wasn't afraid but was holding himself in check, as Ashok was.

As they all were.

The caravan masters exchanged a glance. "We can't be sure," Vlahna said. "All of us were scattered."

"Including the portal Guardians," Ashok said, nodding toward the archway.

"Only one way to find them," Skagi said, twirling his falchion. Ashok could practically feel the energy radiating from the big man's body.

"Spread out," Vlahna said, "but keep one another in sight." She nodded to the shadar-kai who'd come through the portal with Ashok. "Stand guard here while the portal's open."



Tuva turned away, and a spectral panther landed on the overturned cage.

“Get back!” Ashok screamed. He brought his chain up—his arm seemed to move in slow motion. The panther bunched up its hindquarters and sprang, wrapping massive paws around Tuva’s shoulders. The shadar-kai went down hard under the weight of the beast. Ashok’s chain soared high and missed them both.

“Watch our backs!” Ashok moved into a line with Cree and Skagi on either side of him. The brothers fell back, forming a small perimeter.

Vlahna ran to Tuva’s aid. She slashed the panther in the back of the neck with her spikes and darted away as the beast roared and swiped at her. Three-inch claws laid open the armor at her thigh and dug into flesh. Tuva rolled away and drew a greatsword. He held his left hand to a gash at his neck.

To his left, Ashok heard Skagi shout a warning and teleport to avoid another leaping panther. The beast landed in their midst, its claws digging into the earth for balance. This time Ashok snapped his chain out and looped it around the panther’s neck. He turned to find Cree and had a glimpse of the man slashing a katar at a third panther that appeared in front of him. A layer of thick dust caked the panthers’ dark coats. The gritty air hampered Ashok’s vision.

Tuva was right, Ashok thought. They’re all ghosts.

Ashok’s panther jumped and swung its graceful body around in midair. Not wanting to release the chain, Ashok let himself fall. The beast dragged him across the ground in an attempt to shake off the chain, but Ashok wrenched the weapon back and let the spikes dig in and do their work.

Frenzied, the beast rolled over on its back and bit at the spikes. The flesh at its jowls tore—all Ashok could see were the whites of its eyes. A wailing howl issued from the beast’s throat, and the panther surged up and charged him again.

Madness drove the creature. Ashok could see it in its eyes. The Shadowfell panthers had the power to become insubstantial—it took specially designed, enchanted cages to hold them. The creatures should have run from the dust storm, not come back to attack them all. They were looking for death.

Skagi reappeared beside Ashok in his corporeal form. He drove his falchion into the leashed panther's flank. The beast dodged aside before the weapon could penetrate too deep, but the strike slowed it down, and Ashok kept his grip on the lethal spikes.

"The fourth one's out on the plain," Skagi said. "I saw her when I teleported. She took a swipe at me before she realized she was hunting a shadow. She's a big one, but she's just watching us right now."

"Biding her time," Ashok said, his voice strained with the effort of keeping the panther in check. "She's waiting for the others to wear us down." He looked for Cree, but the dust clouds obscured that battle. Tuva and Vlahna kept the other panther at bay, but they both bled from multiple wounds and were already tired from fighting the beasts earlier.

Ashok ripped his chain away. He gripped the spikes now covered in blood, hair, and flesh. The panther stumbled from the pain of the punctures and the gash Skagi had opened on its flank, but it wasn't down yet.

"Think you can finish this one?" Ashok yelled at Skagi.

The shadar-kai was already coming in for the attack. He absorbed a claw swipe against his shoulder to land another stab to the panther's rib cage.

"What, you're giving me your scraps now?" Skagi bellowed. He batted aside claws with his falchion, severing two amid the creature's howls.

"Help Cree when you're done." Ashok teleported to the open plain before Skagi could retort.

He wanted to find the big one.



In the aftermath of the storm, the dust-covered wreckage of the caravan lay strewn about the plain for miles. Ashok limped back to the portal, bleeding from a torn calf, his chain stained with the last panther's lifeblood. He saw the other three corpses near the overturned cage. More guards had come through the portal to tend to the wounded. Tuva and Vlahna as well as three more caravan guards had survived the storm.

The brothers stood a little ways off from the activity. Skagi wore a sullen expression.

"Told you," he said, nudging Cree and pointing to Ashok's gore-covered chain. "He went and stole all the fun we might have had hunting that queen she-cat."

Ashok grinned, but he noticed Cree wasn't smiling the way he usually did at his brother's temper.

"What's amiss?" he said.

"Neimal says we're to report to Uwan right away and tell him what happened out here," Cree said, adding, "We didn't know where you'd gone. For all we knew, that she-cat might have been dragging your corpse back to feed her cubs."

Cree's tone took Ashok by surprise. "You had a battle of your own," he said. "Or would you have taken on two at once, a katar for each?" He tried to keep it lighthearted, but he knew he sounded defensive.

"And you made sure I had help," Cree said, nodding to his brother. "Why didn't you let anyone help you, and why didn't you wait a breath or two for us before you went charging off through the portal?"

"Is that what's worrying you, Cree? That for once I might have been faster than you?" Ashok wrapped up his bloody chain and hung it from his belt like a trophy. "Maybe you need more training."

Cree took a step forward, but Skagi got to Ashok first.

"I'll take your other leg out from under you, pup," he growled. "Then we'll see how well you swing that pretty necklace around."

Tuva and a couple of the guards glanced over at them. Cree put a calming hand on Skagi's arm. "Enough, Brother. Ashok's trying to bait us," he said quietly. "He'd rather fight than confess what's on his mind."

Skagi looked at him with narrowed eyes, but Ashok, shaken by Cree's insight, didn't reply. Finally, Skagi sniffed and stomped away.

"Well, come on," he muttered when neither Ashok nor Cree moved to follow. "I won't keep the Watching Blade waiting, will you?"

"Go on ahead," Ashok said. "I'll be right behind you."

Cree nodded and left to follow his brother. The guards gathered up the caravan debris. Absently, Ashok picked up a dusty wheel and threw it into the back of one of the few intact wagons. Blood covered the ground where Ashok stood, but he couldn't tell if it was shadar-kai or panther blood. Luckily, Cree and Skagi had appeared unscathed after the battle. The panther claws hadn't penetrated their armor.

Their accusations cut Ashok deeper than he wanted to admit.

Ashok had admittedly gotten caught up in the fighting frenzy, but that wasn't unusual for his race. Over the last few months, as he adjusted to his role as a Guardian, he'd cultivated restraint in his fighting and adapted to working his deadly chain with allies nearby. He hadn't intended to leave Cree and Skagi behind. He'd focused on the battle in front of him, and he'd known, when he ran after the big panther, that his companions would come through their battle. That, not his own safety, had been his prevailing thought.

A high-pitched cry from the plain distracted Ashok from his thoughts. More survivors. He sprinted north in the direction of the sound. He ran until the wreckage ended and there was only the open plain scrolling away in broken ridges to the horizon. A line of dim gray clouds riding low overhead reinforced the perpetual twilight of the

Shadowfell. Earth and sky were dismal mirrors of each other. No kindling trees or scrub grass grew on this stretch of land. The unbroken sameness blurred his vision and made him squint, disoriented, into the distance.

The wind whistled sharply, and Ashok thought he might have imagined the cry for help. He was about to turn back when the sound came again, echoing like death's shriek on the wind. The cry shuddered through Ashok's body, and he stumbled and fell.

He knew that sound.

Ashok staggered to his feet. He absorbed the shooting pain in his leg where the panther had wounded him, and he used it to lengthen his stride back toward the portal. He wanted to lose himself in the pain, to block out the piercing, malignant summons that issued from somewhere deep in the Shadowfell.

The nightmare was calling to him.

After eight months of peace, the beast sought Ashok again. It had followed the inexplicable connection between them back to the city where once they'd both been prisoners.

It craved blood. Ashok wondered if the nightmare had found the corpse of the she-panther out on the plain. Did it smell Ashok's hand in the killing?

He tried to ignore the cry. The nightmare's shriek, the smell of blood permeating the caravan wreckage, all of it took him back to that terrible hole in the ground—his former home.

Ashok had come from an enclave of shadar-kai that, to keep their souls from fading, had lost them in the process. They kidnapped a caravan party from Ikemmu, then tortured and killed most of its members. Only the witch Ilvani survived, rescued by Ashok and his companions. Ashok had betrayed his enclave that day, but he'd reclaimed his soul.

To escape from that place, Ashok and the nightmare had forged a path of destruction through the caves that had

obliterated a good portion of his enclave. He didn't regret what they'd saved that day—the lives of Skagi and Cree, Chanoch, Vedoran, and Ilvani—but Ashok would never forget the screams of his people as they died. He heard them now in the nightmare's scream.

There had been so many lives saved, but so many more lost. Chanoch and Vedoran—those comrades were gone now—one to the shadows, the other dead by Ashok's hand.

Ashok went through the portal without speaking to anyone. When he came out into the Shadowdark, the nightmare's scream finally ceased. Ashok stood for a moment in the silence and waited for the memories and the smell of blood to fade. His own wound distracted him, and Ashok knew he would have to seek healing at Tower Makthar before he could present himself to Uwan.

He passed through the gate, which was open to admit what was left of the caravan. His eyes sought Neimal up on the wall, but when he found her, Ashok was surprised to see not one witch but two—Ilvani stood talking with Neimal near the gate.

He tried to catch her eye, but she was absorbed in conversation with Neimal. She'd been like a ghost these past few months—he'd never seen her except from a distance, as now, and she hadn't sought him out.

Just as well. Ilvani had her own nightmares to haunt her, more painful and terrifying than Ashok's beast. His presence would only remind her of them.

Ashok risked another glance up at the two witches. By chance, Ilvani's attention wandered, and she turned and caught Ashok's gaze.

Seeing her face, Ashok felt a displacement, as if he'd gone back in time. The city spiraled away, and he was seeing Ilvani for the first time, eyes burning out of deep skull sockets, a broken body in a cage. He remembered that look on her face, the same look she wore now. Something was terribly wrong.

“Ilvani,” he called out to her, but she was already backing away from Neimal, retreating. She moved down the wall and abruptly teleported to the ground. Ashok caught up with her while her body was still transparent, a spirit drifting between the burned-out houses near the wall. He reached for her arm, but his hand passed through her.

She jerked away from him as if he had touched her. “You’re not supposed to be here,” she snapped. Shadows swirled around her body. “You look when you’re not supposed to look—that’s how your eyes get burned.”

“I’m sorry.” Ashok forced himself to slow, to keep his distance from her. He’d forgotten that talking to Ilvani was often like groping for a candle in a dark room. He was always running into walls. “I want to know what’s wrong. Can’t you tell me?”

“Can’t I tell you? Can’t I lift you down?” She covered her ears with her hands. “If everyone would stop talking all at the same time, you might hear everything.”

The shadows faded as her body took on substance. Ashok noticed deep circles under her black eyes. Though she wore a light nightdress beneath her cloak, she looked as if she hadn’t slept in a tenday. Blood stained her palms, and thick dust streaked her clothes and hair. The implications of her appearance hit Ashok like a fist.

“Gods, Ilvani, were you out on the plain just now?” he demanded. “In the storm?”

She laughed bitterly. “Now you sound like Uwan. ‘Little raven, don’t wander away.’ ‘Little snow rabbit, you might get hurt.’ ”

“I want to help you.”

Her face softened a bit. “You can’t help everyone,” she said. She gestured to his bleeding leg. “You should look after yourself.”

She walked away from him then, and Ashok knew better than to follow her.

## CHAPTER TWO

AFTER HE'D VISITED TOWER MAKTHAR TO ACCEPT HEALING from the clerics of Tempus, Ashok walked beneath the bridges spanning Pyton and Hevalor. In quick strides, he entered the fenced training yard of Tower Athanon. He nodded to Jamet, one of the warrior trainers, who stood before a large group of shadar-kai—the latest batch of recruits to enter Ikemmu's military.

Not long ago, Uwan permitted only servants of Tempus to serve the city in this way, but in the last year all that changed. Now there were warriors whose patrons were Tempus, Beshaba, and Loviatar, among others. Ashok noticed that many of the new recruits displayed the markings of their gods openly, either as symbols worn around their necks or tattoos on their arms and faces. A mark of pride, to be sure, but that wasn't the only reason they wore the symbols in such a way.

They don't believe things have truly changed, Ashok thought. They're testing the new order, daring the followers of Tempus to challenge them. As if to confirm this, several of the shadar-kai turned to whisper to one another and shot Ashok cold glances as he walked past.

Ashok met their stares with a neutral expression, but inwardly he cringed. To Ikemmu he was still Tempus's chosen, a mantle given to him by Uwan, who believed Ashok was a favorite of the war god. Uwan's blind faith had divided Ikemmu and had almost torn the city apart. A tenuous peace had been restored, but Ashok was still esteemed by half the city—and hated by the other half.

"There walks the emissary of Tempus," one of the recruits said. "Don't stand too close to him, or he'll make you the war god's whore too."

Ashok stopped, then turned slowly to face the gathered shadar-kai. He didn't know who had spoken, but his hand



went to his chain. The urge to strike out was almost too strong. He stared at the recruits, silently daring them to come closer and repeat the taunt. The recruits noticed the change in the air. Some of them surged forward, eager to take on Ashok.

"That's enough," Jamet yelled from across the yard. "All of you are mine. If you want to be Guardians, you'll keep your tongues quiet and prove to me you deserve to stand in this training yard!"

The recruits reluctantly turned their attention to Jamet. Ashok lingered a moment longer in the yard, then he entered the tower. When he was out of sight of the recruits, some of Ashok's tension eased. He climbed the winding tower stairs to the topmost level and knocked on the door to Uwan's chamber.

"Come in," came Uwan's voice.

Uwan, Skagi, and Cree stood near the long table where Uwan usually met with his Sworn, his closest military advisers. The leader of Ikemmu was not as large or as menacing as Tuva in his shadowmail armor, but he moved with grace and had a bearing of utter calm about him that was rare among the wild shadar-kai. Standing next to him, still faintly affected by battle lust, Skagi and Cree were like dust-covered fiends. Ashok knew he must look the same.

The brothers nodded to him. Their expressions betrayed nothing of the earlier disagreement.

"Ah, Ashok. How's your leg?" Uwan asked. He saw for himself the healed wound and nodded. "Thank Tempus you're all right. I'm told Tuva, Vlahna, and the other survivors will recover as well."

Ashok nodded, but he said nothing. He was grateful for the healing, but after the scene in the training yard, he wasn't eager to speak of the warrior god.

"Skagi and Cree report that the caravan suffered heavy losses just outside the portal, but they can't be certain how many were lost in the storm and how many were killed by

the shadow beasts that got loose. Is that your assessment as well?"

"Yes," Ashok said, "but nothing about this slaughter makes sense. I've worked with enough of these beasts to know that once they escaped their cages, they should have tried to flee the storm, not stayed in the thick of it to hunt down the caravan crew. Those panthers were mad—they were hunting their own deaths."

"Found 'em, too," Skagi murmured, and Cree smiled faintly.

Uwan shook his head. "Not good enough," he said. "We lost an experienced Camborr and almost an entire caravan when it was nearly home." He looked at the three of them. "Find out why. Talk to the survivors tomorrow once they've recovered and see if they noticed anything strange about the beasts when they captured them. Report to me at the Trimmer bell. That's all."

The abrupt dismissal was unlike Uwan. Ashok exchanged a look with Skagi and Cree. The brothers seemed equally taken off guard. They turned to go, but Ashok hesitated at the door.

"I saw Ilvani earlier, on the wall," he said.

"The wall?" Uwan looked surprised.

"She was talking to Neimal," Ashok said. "I think she was out on the plain, if not in the storm, then at least on the edge of it."

The leader wore a grim expression. "She's been walking the tower at night. I see her sometimes, when I can't sleep myself. She goes up and down the stairs as if she's trying to outrun someone." He looked at Ashok. "I thought, after all this time, she'd be getting better, but clearly, she's still grieving her brother's death."

Ashok noticed that Uwan rarely said Natan's name. Ilvani wasn't the only one still mourning the cleric. "What if it's something else?" he said. "She looked frightened when I saw her. Someone should talk to her, find out what's going on."

Uwan shook his head. "Just let her be alone for now. It took me a long time, but I've learned not to rush Ilvani. When she's ready, she'll tell us what's troubling her."

Ashok wasn't so certain, but he didn't voice his misgivings to Uwan. The leader seemed distracted, eager for them to be gone. Uwan was never so abrupt. Ashok wondered what it meant.

He left the tower with Skagi and Cree, but as soon as they were out of the training yard, Ashok turned to the brothers. "The Watching Blade has something preying on his mind," he said.

"He was worse before you came into the room," Skagi said, "when we told him how many warriors we'd lost."

"Must be the caravan—old memories," Cree said. "We haven't lost one like this since—" He hesitated and glanced at Ashok.

"Since my enclave took Ilvani's party," Ashok said. "If that's what it is, we should talk to the caravan masters as soon as possible and make our report."

His thoughts lingered on Ilvani. She'd said, "You can't help everyone." Maybe that was true, but right now, the idea disturbed him more than he wanted to admit.



After Ashok and the others had gone, Uwan stood staring at the painting of Ikemmu that hung on the wall. Every time he looked at it, he marveled anew at how Ilvani saw the city. She missed nothing, no fire flaw or architectural flourish. How he wished she could interpret her own thoughts with the same clarity. If she could share her pain with someone, it would help her to heal.

The door to his inner chamber opened, and Neimal stepped through.

"I thought I instructed you to wait for me?" he said.

"Forgive me, my lord, but we must discuss a plan of action as soon as possible." The witch came to stand beside him.

Her bald head showed off a claw tattoo running up the back of her neck. “We no longer have Natan’s gift of prophecy to root out threats to the city. We’re on our own.”

“Tempus wills it so,” Uwan said. “We’ve grown to rely on Him too much. We must look to ourselves now and accept His test.”

“Did you tell Ashok about the threat?” Neimal asked.

“No,” Uwan said, “and I ask that you not tell him, either, not yet. He’s only now growing comfortable in his role as Guardian. He feels that he has a place here, and I don’t want to jeopardize that.”

“Even at the risk of his life?” Neimal said. When Uwan turned to look at her, she dropped her gaze and said, “I spoke rashly, my lord. I know you would never do anything to endanger him.”

“Or anyone else in this city,” Uwan said, “if I can prevent it. I’ve been down this road before, Neimal. Until we know the nature of the threat, I will assume nothing. For now, I want you to watch and listen, as you have been doing, to the leaders of the other religions in the city. Find out if this is all bluster or if it has teeth. Once you know for certain, I *will* act, I promise you.”

“As you say, my lord.” Neimal bowed and left the room by the door to the tower stairs, leaving Uwan alone with his thoughts.

Tempus watch over him, Uwan prayed silently. He needs You, whether he’ll admit it or not.



The following day, Ashok, Skagi, and Cree headed back to Makthar, the temple home, to find the caravan masters. Clerics busily tended to wounded shadar-kai newly returned from a raid on the Underdark the previous night. Ashok caught Vlahna coming down the stairs.

“If you’re looking for Tuva”—she hesitated as an angry bellow echoed from two levels above them; she pointed

upward and flashed them a crooked smile—"I'm sure he's aching to have visitors."

"Can you take us to him?" Ashok said. "We'd like to talk to both of you."

She led them up the spiral stair to a recovery chamber similar to the one Ashok remembered from his first day in Ikemmu. Beds filled the room, all of them empty now except for the one occupied by Tuva. The far wall displayed an illuminated carving of Tempus's sword.

A cleric wearing the same symbol bent over Tuva's bed—or, more accurately, Tuva had grabbed the cleric's tabard in his fist and dragged the cleric's face as close to his own as possible.

"How many times did I tell you I wanted the wound stitched up instead of prayer-healed?" he shouted. He pulled down his shirt to expose the smooth, unblemished flesh of his neck. "I lose consciousness for a night, and you do this! There's not a mark here now!"

The cleric, apparently used to this abuse, let himself be manhandled but shouted in his turn, "And I told *you* that by the time I'd found thread and a needle big enough to get through your thick neck, you would have bled to death all over my sickroom!"

"Bah! You damned lazy clerics forget what your hands are for. Bother Tempus with prayers to fix a scratch? Gods, it's all I can do not to rip this flesh open and—"

"Tuva," Vlahna said, waving her arms to get the warrior's attention. "Wait a breath before you rip anything open. These Guardians want to talk to us."

Tuva released the cleric, who straightened his tabard and walked away stiffly. "You all fought well out on the plain," he said. "My thanks for the aid."

"Shame you didn't get to keep your scar," Cree said, grinning.

" 'Shame' is truly the word." Tuva shot another withering glance in the cleric's direction.

“Uwan asked us to speak with you both about the caravan,” Ashok said. “He wants to know what happened out there with the shadow beasts.”

Tuva sobered, though an angry flush still stained his face. “We’ve led caravan runs on the Shadowfell for five years now, and before that I worked as a guard. In all that time, I’ve never seen anything like what happened out there today.”

“Risic was our Camborr,” Vlahna explained. “He rode alongside the wagons to keep an eye on the beasts during the journey. We were in sight of the portal when the storm came on us. Tuva gave the order to halt, and Risic covered the cages with tarps to protect the beasts.

“Everything was fine, when all of a sudden the cages rattled and the beasts hollered like I’ve never heard before. The noise was so loud, we heard it over the storm. Risic went and lifted one of the tarps, and a panther clipped him on the shoulder. The wound wasn’t bad, but the beasts were all acting crazy.”

“Bashed their brains against the bars,” Tuva said. “We found a pair of shadow hounds, male and female, dead in their cages. You can’t imagine the mess.”

“I can,” said a voice from the sickroom doorway.

Ashok turned and saw Olra, the head of the Camborrs. She and her subordinates trained and cared for the beasts the caravan crews brought back from the Shadowfell. They’d dealt with all manner of strange and deadly monsters. Camborrs served an important role preparing the beasts for sale or use in defense of Ikemmu. In addition to his duties as a Guardian, Ashok had been training with the Camborrs under Olra’s supervision.

Olra’s scarred face looked more grim than usual. She’d obviously heard what had happened. “What did Risic do when the beasts went mad?” she asked.

Vlahna answered her. “Risic thought the storm caused it—maybe the beasts were terrified at being helpless in cages.

He told us to let them loose, that we'd round them up later once the storm passed. If we didn't, he said they'd likely kill themselves, and we'd end up back from a tenday caravan run with nothing to show for it."

Olra shook her head. "The fool," she murmured.

Tuva grunted. "The big she-panther managed to break out by herself. She was stronger than she looked. Once the others were loose, they ran out of the storm, circled back around, and came after us."

"The she-panther killed Risic," Vlahna said. "He never saw his death coming."

Olra nodded. She glanced at Ashok. "Only a mad beast or a starved one would have run back into that storm to hunt."

"Maybe they were already tainted in some way," Cree suggested. "Did Risic or anyone else notice anything strange when you captured them?"

Both Tuva and Vlahna shook their heads. "Everything was fine until the storm," Tuva said.

"Then we have to accept that as the reason, or at least the trigger," Ashok said. He exchanged a glance with Olra, who shrugged. He could tell she had her doubts, but she had no better explanation to offer.

"Thank you," he said to Vlahna and Tuva.

Ashok left the tower with the brothers. Olra followed them down. They didn't speak until they were outside.

"For the time being, I'm giving you Risic's duties," Olra told Ashok. "Think you can handle yourself?"

Ashok nodded. "I can do it," he said, "as long as these two can watch the wall themselves for a few days?"

Skagi put a hand to his mouth in mock alarm. "You hear that, Brother? Ashok's leaving us. What'll we do? First it's guard duty alone—what's next? Sleeping alone? Bathing alone? How will we undo our breeches and piss without him?"

Cree nodded gravely. "I'll aid you, Brother."

Ashok stiffened, but then he saw the brothers' easy grins, and he relaxed. They taunted him in jest.

"Tomorrow at the Monril bell, Ashok," Olra said, ignoring the brothers. She left them to head in the direction of the beast training grounds and forges.

When she was out of earshot, Cree sobered and said, "There's truth in those jests. With Risic's duties and your own, you'll be a Camborr in truth before long."

"When that happens, you'll need a new one of these," Skagi said, lifting Ashok's arm to expose the tattoo of leaping flames that extended from his forearm to his wrist. He'd gotten it for training the nightmare—and because he'd survived the maddening dreams the beast inflicted on its victims.

"I think it should be claws this time," Cree said. "You took down the she-panther, after all."

"He still hasn't told the tale of how he did it," Skagi muttered. "At least you can give us the bloody details, every rip and slash."

"You're right. I'm sorry," Ashok said. "Truly."

Cree nodded. Skagi clapped him on the shoulder. "Fine then, speak," the big man said. "I'm not going to stand out here all day."

"Guardians!"

The shout came from the training grounds. Ashok turned and saw Olra vault the paddock fence and take off at a dead sprint toward the nearby blacksmith forges. He and the brothers raced to catch up with her.

The forge huts spewed black smoke at the cavern ceiling. Thick clouds of it hung in the air like choking shadows. When they got near the closest hut, Ashok heard shouts and the clang of metal coming from within. At first, he attributed it to the normal sounds of forge work, but then Olra ran around the side of the building.

"Escaped from the pens," she said, breathless. "Two shadow snakes. They came this way. We have to warn the



forge masters.”

Cree and Skagi split off and ran to two of the other forges. Ashok yanked his chain off his belt and kicked in the door of the closest hut. A wall of heat struck him in the face. Olra darted in the room ahead of him, a barbed whip in her hand.

The air reeked of iron and smoke and made Ashok’s eyes water. To his right the forge fire blazed, and on his left were workbenches and tables. Some held swages and hammers, while others gleamed with finished swords, axes, and polearms.

The blacksmiths had already found one of the snakes. A shadar-kai man crouched near the weapon tables, and a woman stood silhouetted against the forge fire, her sweat-stained hair stuck to her face, fending off a two-headed black shape with a set of iron tongs.

The snake’s two heads struck and darted at the woman. Its thick, black-scaled body wove in and out of the shadows, movements too fast for even Ashok’s keen vision to follow. Ashok came forward and swung his chain in tight, deadly circles around his body. The links caught the forge light and drew the snake’s attention away from the woman. Tongues flicking, it slithered toward Ashok.

“That’s right,” Ashok said, his voice rough with the effort of holding himself back. “Come to me.” He wanted to send his spinning chain across the small space and cut the snake in two, but he held on to the impulse, letting it strengthen him. Vaguely, he was aware of Olra moving stealthily along the back wall of the hut toward the forge. The only sound he heard was that of his spikes slicing the air. He fell into a hypnotic rhythm, the chain spinning, spinning. He wouldn’t strike until the snake was well away from the woman.

Then he saw, to his left, the other blacksmith grab a dagger off the weapons table.

“Don’t!” Ashok shouted, but he was too late. The blacksmith hurled the weapon at the left head. Spinning in the forge light, the dagger missed and struck off the far wall,

shattering the hypnotic spell Ashok had been weaving with his weapon.

In a fluid movement, the snake darted around and sank its fangs into the muscle of the woman's arm. She uttered a strangled scream and shook her arm convulsively back and forth to try to tear the snake loose, but her movements only made the wound worse.

"Get the left head!" Olra shouted. She didn't wait for Ashok to acknowledge the command but charged forward to get the attention of the right head. Her whip struck repeatedly at the snake's skin, tearing away chunks of flesh.

The right head obligingly came around and struck out at Olra's thigh. The Camborr knocked over a wood bench and deftly slid it between her and the snake. The right head hit the wood, tongue flicking between the slats, then just as quickly retreated. Olra kicked out against the bench and pushed the snake back before coming in overhand with her whip. This time the barbed strands barely missed an eye.

Ashok pulled his chain in and came up over a weapons bench toward the left head. The other blacksmith had picked up a second dagger off the table and prepared to hurl it. Ashok snatched it out of his hand as he ran past across the table.

"Get outside," he told the man and threw the dagger.

The blade sank to the hilt in the snake's flesh. Hissing, the snake released the woman's arm. Dazed and poisoned by the snake's fangs, the woman staggered back and slid to a sitting position against the wall.

Ashok brought his chain up. He didn't want the snake to have time to decide to go after the blacksmith again. He struck the thick meat where the two heads became one, then whipped the chain back for another strike. Between his chain and Olra's whip, they harried the beast so hard that it couldn't decide which threat to defend against first. The heads jerked, twitched, and even snapped at each other in their frenzy.

Yet every time Ashok shifted position in an attempt to corral the snake and move it away from the injured blacksmith, the beast struck out viciously and forced Ashok to defend himself.

"The thing's mad," Olra said. She danced aside as the thick tail whipped at her flank. "Trying to kill itself."

"Just like the panthers," Ashok said. They would never be able to contain the snake. "We'll have to kill it."

"Finish it, then," Olra said. Her scarred face soaked in sweat, mouth set in a grim line, she moved in for the kill.

It wasn't the first time they'd had to put a beast down, but something about Olra's manner was different. Aside from Uwan, she was the most restrained shadar-kai Ashok had ever known, but instead of her usual measured efficiency, she moved forward eagerly and attacked the snake with obvious pleasure.

The Camborr struck the snake again with her whip, and Ashok struck it with his chain, but this time the barbs were slow to come free, and Ashok's chain didn't distract the left head. It turned from him and surged at Olra over the top of the right head. Olra didn't see it coming.

"Watch out!" Ashok screamed. He dropped his chain and dived onto the snake, but its reach was too great. The left head struck before Olra could get her whip up as a screen. It sank its fangs into Olra's neck and drove the Camborr back against the forge hearth. She dropped the whip and flung her left hand back into the burning coals.

Olra screamed, but the snake choked off the sound, biting and pumping venom into her blood as fast as it could in quivering, jerking motions. At the same time, the reek of burned flesh filled Ashok's nostrils. Olra's arm spasmed. She couldn't pull it out of the fire.

Ashok snarled in fury and wrestled with the snake, dragging it back several feet by sheer desperation. Abruptly he saw the dagger still sticking out of its flesh. He let go with one hand and pulled the weapon out. He stabbed down,

repeatedly driving the weapon to the hilt. Finally, he hit something vital. The snake's heads reared up in unison and fell away from the forge.

Released from the snake's fangs, Olra pushed off the forge with her back and fell forward onto her stomach. She pulled her burned hand in close to her chest and lay still, panting.

The snake's heads made one last feeble attempt to strike at Ashok, but he wrenched the knife out and stabbed again to widen the wound. The heads dropped, the left on top of the right, across one of the workbenches.

Ashok rolled away from the corpse. The heat and smoke made him light-headed. He put a hand against the floor to lever himself up and felt his fingers slip in warm wetness—Olra's blood.

"Ashok, are you in there?" Skagi's panicked voice called from outside.

"We're alive," Ashok called to him. "Olra needs healing!"

He didn't know if Skagi heard him. He crawled to where Olra lay. She tried to roll over onto her back but was too weak. Ashok took her shoulders and gently turned her.

The snake had savaged her neck. It hadn't merely poisoned her but had tried to eat her alive in its frenzy.

"Quick strikes, shallow wounds," Olra said. Her jaw muscles were rigid, making it hard for Ashok to understand her. "Doesn't fit ... their nature. Should have been trying to ... hide from us."

"Don't try to talk," Ashok said. "Lie still here while I go to Makthar and get a healer. I'll come back as soon as I can."

He started to rise, but Olra grabbed his arm. "Poison is the same," she said.

*"I know, that's why I have to hurry—"*

She ignored him. "Shouldn't have ... pumped all of it ... into me, but it did. Nothing left to milk ... for the merchants."

Her words penetrated at the same time Ashok saw the milky venom overflowing from her wound. There was almost

as much venom as blood.

"No," he said softly, then louder, "No! Tell me what to do. How do I stop it?"

Glassy-eyed, she pushed his hand away when he touched her wound. "You know enough ... to know when there's no more to be done. When you're ready, you should lead the Camborrs ... You have the skill ... My wishes ... my orders, tell Uwan. My life for the Watching Blade."

She relaxed. Contentment spread over her features, and she closed her eyes.

"Ashok!" Skagi burst into the room. Blood and sweat streamed from his upper body, turning his spike tattoos a glistening red. "You're needed."

"I told you to get a healer," Ashok snarled. "Where were you?"

"I've been with—" Skagi came around the workbench and saw Olra. "Tempus have mercy—"

"Godsdamned oaths won't help us!" Ashok cried.

He expected Skagi to be angry at his blasphemy, but then he noticed the warrior's pallor and the strain in his muscles where he gripped his falchion hilt.

Cree wasn't with him.

"Skagi," Ashok said, in a dead monotone, "what happened?"

"Cree. You'd better come," Skagi said.

Ashok started to get up, but he stopped when he noticed the shallow rise and fall of Olra's chest. "She's not dead yet," he said. "We can't leave her to die alone."

"I'll stay with her," said a faint voice near the hearth.

The injured blacksmith was trying to stand. She clutched the bite wound in her arm, but the fang marks were not as savage as those inflicted on Olra, and no venom dripped from her wound. Ashok and Skagi went to help her. Together they sat her down next to Olra's still form. She cradled the Camborr's head in her lap and nodded to the two men.

"Go," she said calmly. "We're fine."



“The clerics are chanting over him,” was all Skagi said as he led Ashok to the hut at the edge of the training grounds. Inside, two healers, including the one Ashok had seen tending to Tuva, kneeled on either side of Cree, obscuring him from view.

Ashok didn’t speak. As he stood watching the clerics work, he could not hold a thought in his head that didn’t involve killing. A red rage settled over his mind, a haze he did not attempt to quell. The last time he’d felt this way was when he’d confronted and killed Reltnar, a shadar-kai of his own enclave who had tortured Ilvani. Back then the rage had made him cold, methodical, able to deal with each threat as it came. Now he was helpless, as impotent as he had been kneeling at Olra’s side.

Finally, one of the clerics stood up and walked stiffly over to them. “By Tempus’s will, he lives,” the cleric said. He directed the words at Skagi. The big man nodded, betraying no emotion beyond the oath to Tempus he uttered under his breath.

The other cleric left to fetch litters to carry away the dead and wounded, and for the first time Ashok could take in the details of the hut. The room was similar to the other forge, with as much disarray and as many signs of fighting. Ashok looked for the body of the second snake, but it was not in the hut.

Skagi saw him looking and explained. “Cree blocked its escape.” He pointed to a gap between the ceiling and wall stones that admitted patchy light from the torches outside. “This one was smaller than the other, but it still laid into him like a demon. I thought it would take his head off.” He swallowed. “Once he went down, the thing got out, but we’d hurt it enough, it flopped around, didn’t know which way to go. More Guardians came and finished it off.”

Ashok wasn’t really listening. He kneeled in the cleric’s place beside the unconscious Cree. They’d cleaned the

blood off his face, and Ashok saw that the fang marks spread diagonally across Cree's face. One had punctured his cheek, the other his eyebrow. Between them, Cree's left eye was missing, torn from its socket.

"They couldn't save it," Skagi said, and for the first time Ashok heard a catch in his voice. Still Ashok said nothing, and eventually he heard Skagi's footsteps as the warrior left the hut.

Alone, Ashok continued to stare down at Cree. The hot rage finally passed, and he thought he felt nothing, not relief or sadness. He simply stared at the place where Cree's left eye had been and tried to conjure an emotion.

This is what you've wrought, he told himself. Two battles—you may as well have fought in neither of them. Why had he sent the other blacksmith outside? To protect him? He could have helped them, provided another distraction at least. If Ashok had fought with a sword instead of a chain, he could have lopped the thing's heads off one by one. There'd been a table full of weapons, and he hadn't thought to grab anything but a paltry dagger.

Ashok's thoughts continued to ramble. He searched for a reason, he had to find an explanation for how it all went wrong. Why had he tried to grab the snake with his bare hands? Was there something wrong with his chain that had made him discard it? He reached for the weapon to see, but it wasn't there. He realized he'd left it in the hut with Olra.

Olra would be dead by now—Olra, who had been his teacher. She was dead, and he had no weapon. No matter. His chain hadn't been able to aid either her or Cree. If only he'd fought with a sword. He'd killed the she-panther, but he may as well have let it devour him. He waited for Cree to wake and tell him that, that he wished the panther had killed Ashok.

"Wake up," he said, and then, savagely, "*Wake up* and say it."

He waited, staring at that empty socket, but Cree slept on, unheeding.

When the clerics returned, Ashok left the hut and went to find Skagi. He found the big man and a pair of Guardians examining the body of the second snake, which was lying a short distance from the hut. It was smaller than the other serpent and had only one head.

Ashok's Camborr training took over, supplanting his grief for the moment. He reached down and turned the snake's open mouth toward him to examine its fangs. "Almost no venom in this one," he said. "It wasn't nearly as worked up as the other."

"Not from where I stood," Skagi said harshly.

Ashok nodded. "But it was trying to escape, which is what both snakes should have done when they got out of their cages. Something drove them crazy, made them seek out prey when they should have hidden from us."

There was no dust storm to blame this time. Some other force was at work here. He needed to find out what.

"I'm going to the training grounds," Ashok told Skagi. "I need to see how the snakes got out of their cages. Uwan will demand answers once he hears of this."

Skagi nodded. He took the snake's head from Ashok and peeled back its mouth to touch its fangs. Ashok thought he was looking for venom, but then Skagi clenched the snake's head in his fist. Fangs punctured his flesh. Streams of blood sluiced between his fingers and ran down Skagi's arm. The snake's eyes burst. Its skull crumpled into an unrecognizable lump in Skagi's grip.

Tossing the savaged corpse aside, Skagi said calmly, "I'll come with you."

He didn't wipe the blood from his hands.



## CHAPTER THREE

DEEP WITHIN THE CAVES, MOST OF THE SHADOW BEAST CAGES sat empty. Olra had expected to fill them with the spoils from the caravan run—they were clean and ready with strong locks and new enchantments. One of the Camborrs—Ashok recognized him as Olra's assistant—hurried up from the back of the cave to meet them.

"I heard," he said tersely before Ashok could speak. "Ikemmu lost a fierce warrior today."

Ashok nodded brusquely. "Take us to the snake cages," he said, "now."

The assistant led them over to the south corner, where a set of smaller cages had been crammed in one on top of another at waist height. The bars were evenly spaced, no more than three inches apart. "We had them both in the lower cage," he said.

Skagi flicked the cage door with the back of his hand. Metal clanged, and the door swung back on its hinges. "Cage's unlocked," he said disgustedly. "Who opened it?"

The assistant faced them squarely, his head up. "I opened the door," he said.

Skagi took a step forward, but Ashok put his body between the two of them. "Why?" he asked calmly.

"The snakes attacked each other," the assistant said. "We thought at first they were fighting for territory in the small space. When they wouldn't stop, Olra ordered me to put them in separate cages."

"And that's when they escaped," Ashok finished for him. "They'd already gone mad. You couldn't have stopped them."

"I could have died trying," the man said.

Skagi grunted. "So could the rest of us."

"I'm sure Uwan will want to speak to you," Ashok said. "As Olra's assistant, you're the best choice to replace her." He said nothing about Olra's final wishes. He would never be able to take the Camborr's place, no matter how long he trained.

Skagi paused by the row of cages. "Footprints here, small ones," he said. "Olra's?"

The assistant shook his head. "The Lady Ilvani's," he said. "She came earlier, before the snakes escaped."

"Ilvani was here?" A strange feeling crept over Ashok, a dread awareness. He remembered how Ilvani looked after the caravan attack, the terror in her face. The dust on her clothes.

She'd been out on the plain when the panthers went mad.

"Did she say anything?" Ashok asked.

"Nothing," the assistant said. "She just walked among the cages."

"And right after that the snakes went crazy," Skagi said. He looked at Ashok, and Ashok knew they were thinking the same thing.

"We have to find her," Ashok said, "before something else happens."

They hurried out of the caves and returned to the huts, where a group of Guardians lingered to help put the forges back in order. Skagi asked them if they'd seen Ilvani, but none of them had.

"I'll check her chamber," Ashok said. "You go to the wall—tell Neimal to spread the word among the Guardians to be on the lookout for Ilvani, and tell her to seal off the caves. No one goes near the beasts until we find out what's going on."

"You really think she's the cause of all this?" Skagi said grimly.

"I don't know," Ashok said. "As long as we keep her away from the beasts, we should be safe."

"I'll tell Neimal," Skagi said.

Ashok ran to Tower Athanon. He found Ilvani's chamber empty. A search of the tower turned up nothing, and none of the shadar-kai he encountered had seen the witch. Ashok checked the training yard and even ventured into the trade district where the markets were busiest.

He ran up and down the streets, dodging vendors hawking goods from all across the mirror world of Faerûn. The scents of the market—exotic spices, meats, and thick perfumes—mingled with his blood and sweat. The humans, halflings, and dwarves shot him curious or alarmed glances as he ran past and were quick to clear out of his way. He stopped several of them to ask about Ilvani, but none of them had seen a shadar-kai that looked like her anywhere in the market.

As a rule, the other races in Ikemmu showed deference to the shadar-kai as the defenders of the city that sheltered them and made them wealthy, so the people answered Ashok's questions swiftly and with apologies for not being able to aid him.

Defeated, Ashok headed back to the wall. He had to hope the guards found some trace of her, but he also knew that if Ilvani didn't want to be found, she would not be, and there was nothing he could do to root her out.

When he got to the wall, one of the Guardians signaled him. At once he teleported to the top of the wall. Neimal waited for him.

"What news?" he demanded.

In response, the witch drew her sword and faced the portal. Flames shot up the blade with a sudden brilliance that dazzled Ashok's eyes, and the portal activated.

"Ilvani is out on the plain," Neimal said.

"On the Shadowfell? You let her go out there alone?" Ashok said sharply.

Neimal's expression turned black. "Your message to detain her came too late. She asked to leave, and I have no

authority to prevent her from coming and going as she wills. But you, *Guardian*, you I can detain forever.”

Ashok forced his temper in check. “I think Ilvani is in danger.”

“So Skagi informed me. I sent him to find you. Ilvani won’t answer the guards’ entreaties that she come back through the portal. They don’t want to have to force her, and neither do I,” Neimal said. She pointed with her sword at the active portal. “Go to her. She might listen to you, but you should know she’s not alone out there.”

“What?” Ashok cried. “Who’s out there?”

“The guards spotted the nightmare out on the plain within sight of the portal,” Neimal said. “It’s not the first time, either. They’ve heard its screams many times.”

If Ilvani and the nightmare came together, there was a good chance the beast would be affected by whatever caused the other creatures to go mad. Ashok’s insides twisted at the consequences of such a meeting. Ilvani’s magic was strong, stronger than that of any wizard he’d seen in Ikemmu, but the nightmare was a force of nature, the embodiment of the harsh, unpredictable Shadowfell landscape.

It was very possible they would destroy each other.



For the second time that day, Ashok came through the Shadowfell portal at a dead run. Sounds assaulted him—the roar of the constant wind and, above that, a distant, keening scream he knew well. He couldn’t see the nightmare for the clouds of dust drifting on the wind, but he knew the beast was close by. The portal guards stood at their posts, but they fidgeted nervously, their eyes fixed on the horizon. They were all warriors of Tempus—a threat to their city should have made their hearts beat with wild anticipation, for to them there was no greater glory than dying in defense of Ikemmu and Uwan, the Watching Blade.

The nightmare's scream changed all that. It had the unearthly power to foster terror in the hearts of the shadar-kai, preying upon the fear that haunted them the most. To succumb to the nightmare's scream was to believe that their souls were fading, becoming one with the essence of the Shadowfell, lost even to Tempus's power. The Guardians heard the scream and feared that fate, but they kept to their posts.

"Where is she?" Ashok shouted.

One of the Guardians pointed, and when the dust clouds broke up, Ashok saw Ilvani standing alone on the plain. She was barefoot and wore no cloak, but this wasn't unusual. What struck Ashok was her swaying stance and the knife she held in her hand.

The scream echoed again, closer, and the Guardians bared weapons. Instinctively, Ashok reached for his spiked chain. His hand clutched his empty belt. Cursing violently, Ashok remembered he'd left the weapon at the blacksmith forge. He thought of asking one of the Guardians for a dagger, but he realized it would be less than useless against the nightmare if the beast went mad and attacked them in earnest.

First he would find Ilvani; then he would deal with the nightmare.

He approached her cautiously, coming in well within her periphery so as not to surprise her. His stance was eerily like the first time he'd approached the nightmare in the training paddock. He had absolutely no idea what to expect.

"Ilvani," he called.

She didn't answer. She continued to stare into the dust clouds and listened to the nightmare's screams. Cold wind gusted across the plain and blew grit into Ashok's eyes.

"Come back to the city with me. Whatever's happening, we'll help you, I promise."

"I couldn't get them out. My fault," she said. Ashok saw her clearly now, and what he saw shocked him more than

Cree's vacant eye socket.

She'd slashed the long sleeves of her dress. Blood-caked scraps dangled from her elbows. Dozens of ugly cuts covered her forearms. Ashok seized her wrist—she dropped the bloody knife—to see how deep the wounds went. Luckily, most were superficial, except for a particularly nasty slash on the back of her hand.

"Ilvani, what have you done to yourself?"

"The stains—I couldn't get them out, so I had to tear the dress," she said, sounding contrite. She bent to retrieve the knife. "I'll try some more."

"No!" Ashok kicked the weapon away. "Ilvani, why did you do this? I've never seen you cut yourself before."

"You've never seen me at all." Contrition turned to irritation. Her mood shifts, at least, were familiar.

Ashok ripped off a piece of his own sleeve and wound it around her right arm. "We need to get out of here," he said. "Give me your other arm."

He expected her to ignore him, but she held her arm up without complaint. Ashok knew then that something was terribly wrong. Ilvani hated to be touched.

"You should cut them off," she said. "They're not worth anything."

"If I did that, you'd regret it, especially when it came time to—"

Suddenly he stopped wrapping the bandage. The shallower cuts on her left arm—she hadn't made them at random. Ashok saw symbols, repetitive patterns, but they were nothing he could decipher. He started to ask her about them, but a loud scream shattered the air and made Ashok spin. He grabbed again for a weapon that wasn't on his belt.

The nightmare was almost on top of them.

Ashok shoved Ilvani out of the way and dived aside as the stallion charged past them, fiery hooves striking sparks off the ground. A wall of heat came in his wake, hot enough to

make Ashok's eyes water. He'd forgotten the speed, the raw elemental force that surrounded the beast.

The nightmare made a wide circle and came at them again. The stallion's eyes were full of swelling hatred, but as he got closer, Ashok saw the beast leaping and bucking, his neck muscles straining as if against an invisible goad. Foam dripped from his mouth, and his eyes glazed over—the hatred was there, but with an undercurrent of desperation Ashok had never seen before. The nightmare, usually a creature of deadly grace, at that moment behaved like a tormented animal.

He's trying to resist the madness, but he's not in control, Ashok thought. The nightmare was far more intelligent than the panthers or shadow snakes, yet something about Ilvani's presence drove them all into a killing frenzy.

Ilvani stood up. Ashok tried to put his body in front of her, but she shoved at him. "Let it take me!" she yelled.

Ashok grabbed for her again, but she dodged, tripped, and fell directly in the path of the nightmare's deadly hooves. He couldn't get to her in time.

"Tempus!" The name ripped from Ashok's throat.

Sparks flew as the nightmare skidded and reared a breath from caving in Ilvani's skull. For an age, he stayed suspended in the air, his fire drifting over them. Lying on her back, Ilvani watched the flames. They reflected in her black eyes like stars.

Finally, the stallion came down and retreated, but he tossed his head and snorted in furious agitation. His entire body shuddered. Ashok came toward him, but the nightmare let out a short, sharp screech and struck the ground with his hooves.

"It's your own fault," Ashok said with black humor. "You wouldn't leave me alone. How does it feel to have your power turned back at you, a force that gnaws at your mind?"

The nightmare snorted a breath of foul steam on the air. Hands raised, Ashok tried again to approach the stallion.

Red eyes, huge and rolling, followed his movements, but the nightmare didn't retreat this time. The flames coursing through his mane slowly dimmed to a deep blue line. Ashok put his hand against the nightmare's flank and felt the heat so intense, it bordered on pain.

The promise of pain, the constant threat of oblivion. Ashok had almost forgotten how the nightmare's presence affected him. A part of his soul reviled the beast, but another part felt as though it were coming home.

The nightmare felt it too. Slowly, the stallion stopped his restless pacing and pawing. His fetlocks cooled to a deep black color. Under Ashok's stroking fingers, he became almost as docile as a pet.

Ashok heard Ilvani get to her feet and come to stand behind him. The nightmare followed her every movement. His nostrils flared as if the beast scented something terrible in the air.

"Easy," Ashok said, moving his hand up the nightmare's neck. "Whatever it is, it's not going to master you." He turned his head to meet Ilvani's gaze. "You're both stronger than that."

It was a lie. Ilvani didn't look strong. She looked frail, desperate, and utterly alone.

"Natan," she said.

The way she said her brother's name pierced Ashok's heart. "He's not here, Ilvani."

She put bloody hands against her face. Her shoulders heaved with abrupt, violent sobs. "Why can't you just leave it alone?" she cried. "Let the fire burn, let it pound me into the ground. Natan, it hurts. I can see them all, but not you. Not you."

Ashok didn't know what to do. He stood between the two wild creatures and knew he couldn't control either of them. But he kept his hands on the nightmare. The only person Ilvani was in danger of hurting was herself.

"Ilvani, look at me."



When she looked up, she wore a vacant expression. Ashok wondered if she saw him at all. Bloody fingerprints covered her face, and there was dirt on her cheek from her fall. I should take her to Makthar, Ashok thought. Her wounds weren't life-threatening, but if left alone, they would soon be infected and cause her more pain. Of course, if they did, she would hardly notice. Ilvani's entire world was one degree of suffering or another.

"Ilvani," Ashok said. "You know what's happening, don't you—why the shadow beasts are going mad when you come near them? Does it have to do with those symbols on your arms?"

The witch blinked and focused on him. She watched his hand rhythmically stroking the nightmare's flank, so close to the low blue flame. "The telthors are angry," she said, "restless. Their hands are all over me. They leave black marks, grabbing, pulling, *wanting*. The mountain wants, the river wants, the trees want. I can't listen to them if they're everywhere."

Ashok sighed. He should have known better than to expect coherency from her. "Let's get back to the city," he said. "We need to find Neimal."

The witch might know what the symbols on Ilvani's arms meant. If they could solve that puzzle, it might lead to an explanation for the rampant madness.

"You stay here," he said to the nightmare, "unless you'd like to go back in your cage?"

The nightmare snorted and shied away, but he didn't go far. The message was clear: *I'll be waiting for you.*



The guards sent word ahead to Neimal, and the witch waited for them on the other side of the portal. When she saw Ilvani's arms, she said to Ashok, "You must tell Uwan what's happened. He'll want to know that Ilvani is hurt."

Ilvani was an important symbol in Ikemmu, a mystical link between the shadar-kai and Tempus. She had become even more precious since they'd lost Natan and his visions from the warrior god. Unfortunately, it also meant the city saw her less as a person and more as a prophet. Having been in a similar position, Ashok knew that wasn't the kind of regard Ilvani needed right now.

"I have to talk to you, but I don't want to involve Uwan in this yet," Ashok said.

Neimal's eyes widened. "That's not for us to decide. You must—"

"Do you see these symbols?" Ashok showed her Ilvani's unbandaged arm. "Do you know what they are?"

Neimal gently traced the symbols with the pad of her thumb. Ilvani's gaze drifted back and forth between the two of them. Silent tears continued to drip down her cheeks, leaving watery tracks in the blood and dirt. The witch's gaze darkened. Seeing her expression, Ashok couldn't tell whether Ilvani's wounds or her tears disturbed Neimal more.

"You've never seen her this bad before, have you?" he said.

Neimal looked at him. "Never." She let go of Ilvani's arm. "She came to me earlier, raving about spirits of the forest, mountains, and water. She hadn't cut herself. Ilvani *never* cuts herself."

It confirmed what Ashok suspected; that Ilvani had never before been tempted to hurt herself for stimulation. She'd never needed to—her mind was forever active, strange, and deep. Peace and apathy were unknown concepts to her.

"What about the symbols?" he asked.

"I don't recognize them," Neimal said. "They're in no language I know, and they're nothing arcane. For all we know, she made them up in her head."

"I don't believe that," Ashok said. "You said yourself Ilvani never puts the knife to her flesh." Many shadar-kai of the Shadowfell used self-inflicted pain to keep themselves from

fading, but in Ikemmu, such an act was defilement and strictly forbidden. "If she wanted a canvas, she could have drawn on the walls of her chamber. Yet I was just up there and found nothing like this. These symbols mean something."

"Then their origin must be another plane or the mirror world, Faerûn," Neimal said. "They're outside my knowledge."

"Faerûn," Ashok said. The mirror world was outside his knowledge as well, but he knew at least one person who was familiar with it and with sending and receiving messages. Perhaps she would be able to decipher whatever message Ilvani was trying to send them.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**A**SHOK LED ILVANI PAST THE STONE DWELLINGS OF THE TRADE market while the Trimmer bell sounded at the top of Tower Makthar. She trailed a little behind him and stopped every now and then to examine one of the outdoor stalls. Her tears had ceased, but she still walked like a person asleep. Ashok wondered what was in her thoughts.

He was surprised she'd agreed to go with him at all. Ilvani avoided loud places and crowds, any situation where she might have to put her back to another person. Ashok recognized the tense set of her shoulders, the readiness of a body expecting to be hit. It had been the same for him, in his former enclave.

They turned a corner, and Ashok stopped short. Tethered to one of the merchant wagons was a large hound. Its owner probably kept the animal as a guard for his wares. Ashok tried to turn Ilvani aside, but she avoided his reach and walked right up to the wagon. She didn't see the dog.

Ashok cursed and sprang forward, intending to grab the dog's tether before it went mad and attacked the witch. The dog cocked its head and growled at him when he reached for its rope, but Ashok saw no sign of madness in the animal's eyes. Ilvani passed by the wagon and kept walking. The dog paid no attention to her.

Bewildered, he hurried to catch up to Ilvani and kept a close watch as they walked through the market. They passed a pair of horses led by a dwarf. Ashok watched for a reaction from the animals, waited for them to buck and rear as the nightmare had done, but they didn't so much as flinch at the witch's presence.

Whatever its source, the madness Ilvani inflicted on the shadow beasts didn't extend to common work animals. Ashok wondered at this distinction, but he didn't have time

to consider the reason for it. They were almost at their destination.

Ilvani slowed as they approached the halfling Darnae's shop. Her gaze went immediately to the carvings around the arched brick doorway. She traced one with her fingernail and then turned her hand to look at it, as if she expected the symbol to rub off on her.

"This is one of the old houses, built before the shadar-kai came here," Ashok said when she looked at him questioningly. Darnae had told him so when he'd visited before. "Will you come inside with me?"

She didn't move. Ashok stepped over the threshold and turned to show her that nothing bad had happened to him. He held out his hand.

In response, she glared at him.

She was back to her old self enough that she didn't want to be touched. He dropped his hand. He didn't know whether to be grateful or not.

She came over the threshold. Her eyes took in the room in one swift glance: parchment, quills and ink arranged on cloth-covered tables, the room lit with soft candlelight. The surroundings brought peace to Ashok's mind.

Why was it that he always felt so comfortable here, in a place as far from the world he knew as the mirror world was from Ikemmu?

Maybe it was simply the presence of the woman who stepped out now from the back room of the shop. Darnae had bright, prominently blue eyes and an angular face that lit with pleasure when she saw Ashok.

"I thought I might see you today, Ashok," she said. "I opened a bottle of wine that Tatigan brought me. He had you in mind when he got it...."

Her voice faded as she stepped around the counter and saw Ilvani. The witch crouched at eye level with a rack of quills, so that when she turned to look at the halfling, the two of them were eye to eye.

“The birds lost all their feathers,” Ilvani said. “No more owls.”

To Darnae’s credit, she hesitated only for a breath. Then she nodded thoughtfully, as if Ilvani had pointed out a fact she’d never considered before. She walked over to the rack, picked up a quill, and fitted it to Ilvani’s hand. To Ashok’s surprise, Ilvani didn’t jerk away when the halfling touched her fingers.

“Ashok.” Darnae addressed him, though she never took her eyes off Ilvani. “Could I ask you to go around the counter to the back room and get my bandages and the water basin, please? The ceiling slants downward back there, so watch your head.”

“I don’t think I should leave.”

“Go,” Ilvani said, surprising him again. “I’m fine.”

Ashok went to the back room and found the bandages and the basin. He brought them to the middle of the room where Darnae and Ilvani had arranged themselves on the floor. Ilvani was trying to hand Darnae back the quill, but Darnae wouldn’t take it, so Ilvani slipped it into the green bag she had tied at her waist.

“My thanks, Ashok,” Darnae said. She put the basin on her lap and began unrolling the bandages. “Won’t you sit with us?” she said when Ashok remained standing.

He sat, his hand automatically moving to shift his weapons. He still hadn’t recovered his chain from the forges. He hadn’t checked on Cree, either, or made his report to Uwan about Olra’s death. Everything that had happened in the past few hours was like an indistinct dream. All he had been able to think about was Ilvani’s safety—no, that wasn’t entirely true. He needed answers, a reason why Olra had died. He needed an explanation to give to Cree for why he had lost his eye.

But more than anything, he needed to be doing something. If he stopped for a breath to think, the red rage would consume him again.

He sat in silence while Ilvani let Darnae tend to her wounds. The halfling removed Ashok's hasty bandage and cleaned the cuts—Ashok saw her pause when she discovered the symbols, but he didn't say anything, just let her examine the marks—and when she finished bandaging them, she wet a strip of cloth and wiped Ilvani's face clean. Throughout the ministrations, Ilvani didn't move or protest. Ashok marveled at the two of them.

He hated to disturb the scene, especially with Ilvani so tranquil, but finally he had to speak. "Darnae, this is Ilvani. I've told you about her before."

"You have, and I'm pleased to know you, Ilvani," Darnae said. Her smile quickly faded, though, and she sat aside the basin of water, now pink with Ilvani's blood. "What brings you here now and with such wicked wounds?"

"I made them," Ilvani said before Ashok could answer.

"I see." Darnae stood and went to one of the tables. She brought back a sheet of parchment, quill, and ink. Dipping the quill in the black liquid, she drew a quick sketch of one of the symbols Ashok had seen carved on Ilvani's arm.

"Do you know what it means?" Ashok said.

Darnae sighed and nodded. "The language belongs to the peoples of northeastern Faerûn—a high, cold, and mysterious country. Have you ever heard of Rashemen?"

Ashok shook his head, but Ilvani stared at Darnae steadily. "Snow and spirits," she said.

"Yes," said Darnae. "I've never traveled there myself, but put simply, that's what Rashemen is, and that's what this symbol means—'spirit.' Their people worship the spirits of the land."

"*Telthor*," Ilvani said quietly.

Darnae nodded. "That's the Rashemi name for them."

"How do you know about the spirits, Ilvani?" Ashok asked.

"The woman told me," Ilvani said. "The snow rabbit. The unproven. She tried to tell me more, but the darkness and the storm came between us."

“The dust storm?” Ashok said. “You mean the same one that caught the caravan?”

Ilvani shook her head. “I see her in my dreams. The storm is in my dreams. It swallows us up.”

“The woman you saw might be one of the witches,” Darnae said. “They rule Rashemen and command the magic of the spirits.”

“But how is she able to contact Ilvani across an entire world, and why?” Ashok said.

Darnae shrugged. “Rashemi magic is said to be powerful. Whatever the witch’s reasons—”

“She’s in danger,” Ilvani said. “She asked me to help her, but I couldn’t.”

“It’s not only her,” Ashok said. He told Darnae what had happened earlier that day. When he’d finished, Darnae looked more concerned than ever.

“I’m so sorry, my friend,” she said, laying a small hand on Ashok’s arm. Ashok looked down at her tiny fingers and remembered how fragile she was—a child but not a child.

“I thought if you could decipher the symbols, we might be able to figure out why this is happening,” Ashok said. “But you can’t fight dreams.” He should know. The nightmare’s haunted visions had tested and beaten him once.

“There is something we haven’t considered,” Darnae said. “The shadow beasts and the shadar-kai are connected to the Shadowfell, which is itself a world of spirits. The witches of Rashemen have a similar connection to their telthors, and if some force is disturbing the natural order on the Shadowfell plane—”

“Then it’s possible something similar is happening to them in Faerûn,” Ashok said.

It explained the pattern of the madness. The common animals in the trade district had been unaffected by Ilvani’s presence, and the shadow snake, the one that had tried to escape from Cree and Skagi, was smaller than its two-



headed companion, weaker in mind perhaps and less connected to the Shadowfell and its influence.

"It could be the witch is reaching out to Ilvani to try to understand what's happening." Ashok looked at Ilvani to see what she thought of this, but the witch had stretched out on the floor with her head resting on her bandaged arm. She was asleep.

"She looks exhausted," Darnae said. "Her dreams must be terrible."

"It's strange, though. I've never seen her as peaceful as she looks right now," Ashok said. On the plain, she'd been broken, ready to die. Now she slept like a child, and she'd been more coherent speaking to Darnae than to anyone else. "Something about your presence calmed her."

"I don't think it has anything to do with me," Darnae said. "But this building ..."

"Ilvani seemed fascinated by the traces of magic."

"It's possible the magic was once protective in nature," Darnae said. "If that's true, then its echoes might be creating a barrier to the Shadowfell forces."

"Whatever it's doing, I'm grateful," Ashok said. "She deserves some peace."

"So do you," Darnae observed.

Ashok shook his head. "Not until I find a way to stop what's happening to her. This Rashemi witch wasn't invited into her dreams."

He took off his cloak and laid it over Ilvani's sleeping body, taking care not to touch her. It was time to talk to Uwan and decide what action to take. He knew the leader would do everything in his power to protect Ilvani, if for no other reason than to safeguard her connection to Tempus.

"You should leave her here," Darnae said. "Let her sleep while she can. I'll watch over her."

"Thank you," he said. "I'll be back for her soon."

She offered him a fleeting smile. "Someday, at a more peaceful time, we will have that wine together."

He clasped her small hand. "I'd like nothing better."



Ashok found Skagi in the training yard, which was empty now. The recruits were occupied with other duties. Skagi had his falchion out and waved it in a series of midair strokes, but the movements were restless, with an edge that belied his calm exterior.

"What news?" he asked Ashok. "Where is the witch?"

"Safe," Ashok said. "Our guess was right. Somehow, she's causing the Shadowfell beasts to go mad, but the threat comes from her dreams." He related what Darnae had told him.

Skagi cursed and sheathed his falchion. "What do we do about it?"

Ashok spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. He sympathized with the warrior. Like Skagi, he wanted an enemy in front of him, a clear target he could attack. Right now, they had neither.

Suddenly the door to the tower opened, and Uwan came out. The leader saw the two of them, and his expression darkened.

"I have news," Ashok said, but Uwan made a sharp gesture, cutting him off.

"Don't bother," he said. "I've spoken to the Sworn of the Wall. She told me the whole tale, which was your duty, not hers. All I want to hear now is where Ilvani is."

Ashok told him, including his conversation with Darnae.

The leader's expression softened somewhat. "I'm sorry to hear of Olra's death," Uwan said. "She was one of the finest Camborrs I've ever seen. Tempus will guide her soul to its rest."

Ashok felt his rage rekindled at the mention of the god's name. A tremor went through his body, an impulse to strike out at Uwan that he'd never felt before. "If Tempus had been

more attentive, he might have saved her life," he said bitterly.

Naked anger showed on Uwan's face, exactly as Ashok intended. He grabbed Ashok's breastplate and yanked him forward. "You question Tempus's will, after all He's done on your behalf?" Uwan said. "You speak out of grief and ignorance. I won't hear it."

Uwan would hear nothing against Tempus. That was the worst part. Nothing would threaten the leader's conviction that Ashok was favored by Tempus. In Ashok's view, that made him little more than a toy to be manipulated and directed as the god saw fit.

But Uwan had seen the proof with his own eyes, or so he claimed. Deep in the caves of Ikemmu, while he and Ashok fought for their lives against Vedoran, a vision had appeared. Uwan was convinced that Tempus had intervened that day to save Ashok's life.

"I didn't ask for any god to act on my behalf," Ashok said. He wrenched himself from Uwan's grasp and stepped back to put some distance between them. "Remember our agreement. A Guardian—I serve Ikemmu, not Tempus."

"Yes, and as such, you should have come to me immediately when Ilvani was hurt," Uwan said. "You earned your place in Ikemmu, but now you have to abide by the rules that come with the rank. I should have you both thrown in a cell until you learn your place."

"I'm to blame, not Skagi." Ashok ignored the other man's protests. "I wanted to help Ilvani. She's safe with Darnae—"

"Darnae? A halfling," Uwan said, "who knows nothing of the shadar-kai and even less about Ilvani."

"She's lived in this city a long time and breathes the Shadowdark air just like the rest of us," Ashok said. "She knows the shadar-kai. Ilvani will be safe with her."

Uwan glared at him. "Your judgment is impaired where Ilvani is concerned. You know almost nothing about her

needs or her nature, yet out of guilt you've taken her protection on yourself."

Ashok started to speak, then stopped. He knew Uwan was right. He didn't know enough about Ilvani to understand what was going on in her mind.

"Punish me however you want," he said, "but what Darnae said about the Rashemi—is it possible she's right?"

"I know little about Rashemen and its witches," Uwan said. "But Natan and I once spoke at length about Ilvani. Her brother knew her best. He told me that her ramblings are deceptive—there is meaning beneath them, but it's indecipherable because no one among the shadar-kai can see as Ilvani does."

"She says she can see the telthors—the Rashemi spirits," Ashok said.

"I have no doubt she can. Natan believed that she could see much more," Uwan said. "Just as he was a conduit to Tempus, so Ilvani has an intimate connection to the Shadowfell, the passage for the spirits of the dead. The shadar-kai, rightly, do not dwell on the shadowy paths of the soul. We fix our gaze on the light of Tempus. Natan told me Ilvani has no such luxury. There are spirits everywhere, existing in worlds hidden from our eyes."

"And Ilvani has a window into those other worlds," Ashok said, understanding what the leader was getting at. If it were true, it would mean Ilvani's mind was constantly being bombarded by images she couldn't fully comprehend, let alone communicate to others. "Right now this Rashemi witch has a stronger connection to Ilvani than anyone else. We have to help her."

"Agreed," Uwan said. He looked thoughtful. "Since we can't pry into Ilvani's dreams, the only course of action I can see is to send you and Ilvani to Rashemen."

"To the mirror world?" Ashok felt something stir in his blood.

“It’s not as far away as it sounds,” Uwan said. “Trade caravans venture out from the Underdark often, and some of them pass through Rashemen. You’ll take a party and accompany one such caravan. Your mission will be to travel with it as far as Rashemen and then seek the counsel of the witches.”

“Will they accept outsiders like us?” Ashok said.

“You mean shadar-kai? If they won’t, you’ll have to convince them,” Uwan said. He gave a short laugh. “You’re certainly stubborn enough to find a way.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

*T<sub>HE</sub> V<sub>ILLAGE</sub> OF T<sub>INNIR</sub>, R<sub>ASHEMEN</sub>*

LOOK HERE, ELINA." SREE LED THE CHILD UP TO THE PEBBLED stretch of shoreline and pointed to a cold-water minnow school swimming in the shallows. No bigger than the child's fingers, they bobbed the surface of the gray water, mouths open in search of food.

The little girl obediently went down on her knees to look at the darting fish, but it seemed to Sree that, as with everything else the child did, she was only acting to please the adults around her. She had barely spoken since her mother's death and ate only what Sree put in front of her. Whenever Sree left the child to sit quietly by herself, Elina would stay there, unmoving, until the hathran came to find her again.

Lake Tirulag scrolled away from them in the distance, its surface broken by a light, cold wind, and the dozens of boats that fished the lake for trout and crayfish. Dim sunshine shone through the stringy cloudbanks over the hills, but it was not a warm light. Ice patches had already formed in these shallow areas, trapping grass, dirt, and the unfortunate minnow or two, but Sree steered the child away from these sights and directed her gaze toward living things.

Sunlight touched them, and the hathran crouched next to the child. "Do you see our reflections, Elina?" She pointed to the child's face staring back at them impassively from the water. Above her shoulder hovered the hathran's mask. The dark image made the symbols carved upon it indistinct. Sree couldn't make out the leaping flames of the hearth or the mountain peaks that also symbolized the stone roofs of the homes here in Tinnir. Hearth and home, fire and mountain—all were a part of her; all were one.

But did Elina see it that way? Reflected in the gray lake, the child saw a mask with a stranger's eyes staring out. Elina knew, as did all Rashemi, that the witches were the trusted caretakers of the people, but did that include letting a stranger take the place of her mother? Sree could hardly expect Elina to trust her completely, not yet.

Sree drew back, so that only Elina's reflection was visible in the lake. "We must move on now," she said. "Not far from here, a young woman is about to become a mother twice over. I must go to her and ask for Bhalla's blessing upon the birth. Would you like to come and watch this miracle?"

Elina nodded once and reached for Sree's hand, but again the hathran saw no spark of emotion, no interest whatsoever in the world that continued to move while the child stood still. Sree led the child on by the lake, but in her heart, she prayed for guidance:

Mother Bhalla, grant me patience, strength, and the will to be gentle with this child. As we wyclaran have been set apart from others, so too will this child be set apart from us. If she is destined to be an othlor, she will need your guidance.

Sree ended the prayer with her traditional blessing, words she often spoke or sung, but this time recited in silence:

*Hearth and fire, home and mountain  
Path of those who came before  
Guard my spirit as I walk alone  
And I will watch for thee*

Sree felt a sense of peace and purpose settle over her. It will be all right, she thought. In time, all will be well.

Then she heard the scream.



The hut had whitewashed walls, a small garden dormant in preparation for winter, and a sheep paddock in back against the low-rising hills. The smell of damp wool and wood fire smoke filled the air. A dozen sheep clustered together at the

back of the paddock, as far away from the screams as they could get.

Sree didn't stop to knock at the weather-beaten door—she flung it open and pulled Elina inside with her. With a brief glance she took in the hearth fire hung with a kettle of boiling water; the blood-soaked rags hastily discarded in a corner; the offerings to Bhalla and the lake spirits placed on the bedroom threshold. All of this was as it should be for the birthing, but the woman's screams were screams of panic and terror, not the determined cries of a mother about to meet her children for the first time.

Amid the screams, voices from the bedroom—including the village healer's—tried to soothe and cajole the young woman to breathe, but Sree heard the carefully concealed desperation in the words.

She found a stool near the fire and sat Elina upon it. No need to tell the child to stay put—Sree knew she would be there waiting when the ordeal was finished. She found soap and clean rags on a table in the corner and dipped one in the boiling water. After she'd washed her hands thoroughly, she went into the bedroom.



Elina sat on the stool and watched the fire. The heat felt good on her cold nose, but the air in the house was too thick, and it smelled rotten. She would rather be back at home in her own bed.

She sat on the stool, not moving, until her legs started to cramp from dangling just above the floor. She slid off and stumbled, scraping her knee against the floor. The scratches were red when she looked at them, and a drop of blood welled up. Elina watched it slide down the back of her leg.

In the bedroom, the woman's screams got louder. Elina put her hands over her ears to drown them out, but it didn't help. The smell got worse too—it made her nose itch, and she knew she remembered it from somewhere. She tried to



find something in the room to look at, but there was only the pile of red rags and the windows filmed over with dirt.

“Bhalla, aid me!” The scream from the bedroom made Elina cower. She put her arms over her head and ran out of the house. She didn’t even realize what her feet had done until she stood in the dooryard, blinking in the watery sunlight.

There was no relief outside. Sheep ran around their paddock, wailing, crying, and frantically pushing one another to escape the screams from inside the house. Elina felt sorry for them, but she was frightened too. She saw a sheep chewing a fence post where the wood met the ground. It chewed and chewed until blood and spit dripped from its mouth. The animal’s eyes looked strange, as if they were blind.

A ewe slammed its head into the fence post nearest Elina. She screamed, the ewe screamed, and Elina ran. She bolted around the side of the house, but the paddock and the sheep were everywhere. Against the side of the house was a tall woodpile. Elina found a slender gap between the stacked wood and the wall and crawled into it.

The air smelled better here, earthy and moist. Wetness soaked through her wool skirt, but Elina hardly noticed. She lay down on the ground and covered her ears against the sheep cries. She could see through gaps in the woodpile their frantic, scuffling movements. Could they see her back here? What if that was why they were trying to get out of the paddock—to come after her? She wanted to close her eyes, but she was afraid they would get her when she wasn’t looking, so she pressed her face to a gap in the wood and watched.

A single eye gazed back at her from the other side of the gap.

Elina screamed and covered the hole with her hands. She pushed herself back and hit her head against the side of the house. Pain made her vision go dark for a minute. When she

came back to herself, she felt gentle hands cradling her head and fingers stroking her hair.

Sree, Elina thought. She came to find me.

When she raised her head, it wasn't Sree looking back at her, but a small figure with spindly arms and legs.

Elina felt a new surge of fear. She breathed very fast, but the small creature shook its head and laid its hands—so much smaller and thinner compared to her own—on her arm in a soothing gesture. It was then Elina realized the creature was made of wood. The hands that touched her curved and were sharp like twigs snapped off a sapling. The creature's hair was green and brown, alive with rare white heather blossoms, dirt, and earthworms. As Elina watched, more of the small flowers sprang up at different places on its body. The tiny thing both fascinated and repelled her, for it was unlike any creature she'd ever seen.

"Are you ... the tree people?" she whispered. Her mother had often spoken to her of the spirits of the forest, especially those that lived in the pinewoods around Tinnir.

Green eyes sparkled, and the grains of wood in the creature's face warped in what could have been a smile. The spirit reached up and touched the back of the woodpile. Suddenly, the sheep cries melted away, and the cut wood grew vines and flowers to fill in the gaps in the pile.

Elina watched, speechless. She felt the air grow comfortably warm, and the grass beneath her wet skirt turned soft and thick. Never had she felt so warm and safe out of doors.

Her mother used to warn her about what could happen if she went to the wild places alone, but this wild forest pocket drew protectively close around her, and the spirit sat beside her as if to keep watch.

Suddenly Elina realized how sleepy she was. She covered a yawn with her hand. Seeing this, the spirit beckoned her to the grass, and Elina laid her head down on the soft green pallet. The white blossoms hovering near her nose smelled

like honey, and the last thing she thought of before she drifted off to sleep were the thick honey rolls her mother used to bake on the bitterest winter mornings. She'd bring them out steaming on a warm plate, and, the two of them, wrapped in the thickest blankets they owned, would eat them in front of the fire.

"Don't waste a drop," her mother would say, and then she would run her tongue in a circle over her lips to catch any forgotten stickiness. Elina imitated her now, her small tongue touching the white blossoms.



She awoke to someone furiously shaking her.

"Get up," Sree hissed. She was too big to fit behind the woodpile, but Elina could see through bleary eyes the hathran's masked face staring in at her. Evening had come, and as she sat up, Elina realized the tree spirit had gone. The woodpile was back to being a woodpile, all sticks and wet earth. The rotten smell was back, assailing Elina's nostrils more strongly than ever, but at least the sheep had stopped crying.

Still reluctant to leave her nest, Elina sat up slowly and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Sree was not so patient. She seized Elina by the arm and all but dragged her out from behind the woodpile.

"Turn toward me," the hathran commanded, and put her body between Elina and the fence. "You worried me to death, Elina, running off like that. I called and called, but you didn't answer. You must never hide from me again, do you understand?"

Sree picked her up and forced her face down against her shoulder. Elina's cheek pressed uncomfortably against Sree's collarbone. The witch's skin was sticky and smelled like sweat. Elina didn't like being carried like this. She couldn't see anything.

“Stop struggling. What’s come over you?” Sree held her head immobile. Elina caught a glimpse of the open door to the house and heard a baby wailing within.

A single baby’s voice—but Sree said there were going to be two....

“Thank Bhalla that at least one babe could be saved,” Sree murmured under her breath. Elina felt the vibration of the words in the hathran’s throat, and she heard the grief as well. “Close your eyes now, child. Go back to sleep if you can.”

Sree moved quickly away from the house. She sounded frightened, and that scared Elina. But as she stepped over a fallen tree branch from one of the nearby pines, her stride faltered and so did her grip on Elina’s head. Elina peaked over the witch’s shoulder.

Behind the fence, a dozen sheep lay in a pile so densely packed it was hard to tell where one body ended and another began. Their eyes bulged in a fixed, dumb stare, tongues lolling out the side of their mouths. Every one of the animals had had its skull crushed. Elina saw the red splashed on the fence posts where the sheep had driven their skulls into the wood over and over again.

Elina ducked her head against Sree’s neck, but she couldn’t control her trembling. The witch stopped suddenly and set her on the ground. Elina looked down at her skirt and realized she’d soiled herself. She trembled, cried, and turned red with the shame of it.

“Look at me, child.” Sree took Elina’s chin in her hand and tilted her head up to look into the masked woman’s eyes. “You need never feel shame before me. Fear is not shameful. A wise witch knows how to use her fear to make herself strong.” She picked Elina up again and cradled her close. “I am afraid too, Elina. The sheep are a bad omen, but we must trust in Bhalla and the spirits. They will not lead us astray.”

Sree walked on, and Elina thought about telling the hathran what she’d seen behind the woodpile. No, she

thought, that was her secret, a private, precious thing between her and the spirit.

As precious as when her dead mother visited Elina in her dreams.



*I*KEMMU, *THE* *S*HADOWDARK

*7* *M*ARPENOTH, *THE* *Y*EAR OF *D*EEP *W*ATER *D*RIFTING (1480 DR)

The day after Olra's death, Ashok and Skagi went to Tower Makthar to visit Cree and tell him about the mission.

He sat up in bed when they came into the sickroom. His face split in a grin when he saw them. Except for the missing eye, he looked like himself.

"At last," he said. "I was beginning to think I'd have to break out of here myself, half-naked and with no weapons, but now that you two are here, I'll have company."

Skagi laughed. "I'll wager the clerics all wish you'd lost your tongue and not the eye," he said.

Ashok winced, but Cree joined in his brother's laughter. "As soon as my jailers turn me loose, I'm going to the inker," Cree said. "Uwan said I needed prettying up after that battle."

Skagi nodded approvingly. "But you were always too pretty for your own good anyway."

Cree looked at Ashok. "What do you think, Ashok?" He traced his eyebrow down to his nose and across his cheekbone. "The snake marked me, so I'll put its mark right here."

Ashok swallowed. "Whatever you wish," he said.

The brothers shared a look, and Cree's smile dimmed. "Olra was a fine warrior, the best Camborr leader we've ever had," he said.

"That she was."

He thinks that's why I'm silent, Ashok thought. He doesn't blame me at all. But it didn't matter. Ashok had only to look at Cree's face to remind himself of his failure.

“We bring news from the Watching Blade,” Skagi said when the silence became uncomfortable. “Wouldn’t you know it, Ashok and the witch plan to drag us off on another adventure?”

“Oh?” Cree said. “Is that why they’ve insisted on keeping me abed for this long?”

“More likely you were lazing about.” Skagi dodged Cree’s elbow.

Ashok nodded. “They want your strength back and the poison completely out of you. We’re taking Ilvani to Rashemen, in Faerûn.”

Cree’s remaining eye widened. He leaned forward eagerly as Ashok and Skagi told him about Ilvani’s dreams and her connection to the mad shadow beasts. Ashok also shared what he’d learned of Rashemen from Darnae.

“I’ve been to the Underdark and to the surface,” Cree said, “but I’ve never traveled that far in the mirror world.”

“Neither have I,” Skagi said, “but the caravans go back and forth all the time. They send the cargo through a portal to the surface, so raiding parties won’t get at it. Usually there are a fair number of guards—shadar-kai, humans, maybe some dwarves. Even the well-traveled trade routes are dangerous, so there’s good coin for that sort of work. Well, you remember how Vedoran used to talk about it.”

Ashok remembered. Vedoran had been well regarded as a sellsword, though everything inside him detested the work he’d been relegated to because of his beliefs. Ashok wondered if there were any shadar-kai sellswords left now that they were allowed to serve in Ikemmu’s military.

“Even with the experienced guards, that doesn’t change the fact that none of us three have the knowledge of Faerûn we need. We won’t know what to expect once we’re out of the Shadowfell,” Ashok said.

“We should talk to Tatigan,” Cree said. “Judging from the goods he’s brought back, he knows every trade route and

merchant in Faerûn. He'll be able to tell us what we're in for."

"That's a good idea," Ashok said. He stood, and Skagi moved to join him at the door. Cree started to follow them.

"Oh now, where do you think you're going?" Skagi said. He crossed his arms and blocked the door.

Cree looked at him incredulously. "You can't mean me to stay here? I'll eat through the walls or fade away if I don't get out of this damned circular cage."

"The clerics want to make sure there's no lasting damage from the poison or anything in the snake's blood that might have affected you," Ashok said.

"He doesn't want you spitting foam like a mad dog on the caravan journey." Skagi snickered.

Cursing, Cree trudged back to his bed. "I'll make you pay for every bit of enjoyment you're getting out of this, Brother," he warned Skagi.

"Looking forward to it," Skagi said.

Ashok watched Cree climb back into his bed. His elbow bumped the bedside table and knocked over a cup of water sitting there. The liquid made a dark stain on the stone floor. Though he tried to hide it, Cree stiffened, and the muscles in his jaw clenched. He turned, moving more slowly than Ashok had ever seen him, and picked up the empty cup.

Ashok left the room before Cree noticed that he'd lingered.

When they were outside the tower, Skagi said, "He'll come back from it, you know. Just needs time to adapt. He might not be as fast as he was before, but he'll still be able to outpace the rest of us."

"I don't doubt it," Ashok said.

"But you look at him like he won't," Skagi muttered. "Makes it harder on him."

Ashok stopped. "I didn't realize."

"We're all Guardians," Skagi said, "ready to pay the price to protect Ikemmu, even if Uwan asks for a limb." He looked

at Ashok with a strange, unreadable expression. “Did you forget we’re all willing to give it?”

“I didn’t forget,” Ashok said.

He hadn’t forgotten, he told himself stubbornly. He’d just never thought it would be necessary. If he could keep them safe, that sacrifice would never be needed.



Ashok considered going to Darnae to ask the halfling where to find Tatigan, but it took only a few minutes of asking around the trade market to locate the merchant. He kept chambers in Tower Pyton near the topmost span, one of the bridges that connected the tower to its sister Hevalor.

The door stood ajar when he and Skagi arrived. They could see the merchant pacing back and forth in front of the door. During one pass, he saw them and beckoned.

The room was smaller than Ashok expected from the merchant, who dealt in some of the most exotic goods in Ikemmu. Tatigan had a reputation for catering specifically to the needs of the shadar-kai and their constant search for new experiences and pleasures. His own quarters were simple, but what furnishings he owned appeared to be of the finest quality, even to Ashok’s uneducated eyes.

A large bed covered in thick blankets and furs took up one side of the room; a dark wood table with two chairs matched a large desk at the far side of the room. The smoothly polished wood grain followed a beautiful pattern like falling rain. Maps of Ikemmu, the Underdark, and various parts of Faerûn covered the walls. Next to them hung a single painting of a green landscape—a vast forest as seen from a distance through pale mist. A path veered through the wood, and on the path were riders wearing a livery Ashok didn’t recognize.

“That’s Cormyr,” Tatigan said, following Ashok’s gaze. “I’m told the painting once belonged to Azoun IV, a former king, though I’ve never had it verified.”



"How go your studies of Ikemmu?" Ashok asked. He nodded to the stacks of parchment on the merchant's desk, a strange mixture of account keeping and research notes written in spidery shorthand.

"Well enough. I don't have as much time for them as I'd like, but now that you're here, maybe I'll make some progress," Tatigan said. He had on loose-fitting trousers and a silk shirt overlaid with a vest of light gray fur. As was his custom, he wore spectacles with dark green lenses, even in the dimness of the lantern-lit room.

"What makes you say that?" Ashok said.

"Oh, that reminds me, I have something I think you'll want to try, Skagi." Ignoring Ashok's question, the merchant went to the table, pulled out both chairs for them, and took down a decanter of wine and two glasses from a shelf above his head. He poured a taste into one of the glasses and handed it to Skagi.

"Don't need to be so stingy," Skagi said, eyeing the tiny amount. "I wasn't going to drink it all."

Tatigan chuckled. "You'll want to take this vintage slowly, my friend. It hits you when you least expect it."

Skagi sniffed the drink, then drained the glass in one swallow despite the merchant's warning. Tatigan poured a slightly greater amount into the second glass and offered it to Ashok.

Ashok took the glass, but he hesitated before putting it to his mouth. "What did you mean when you said you'd make progress with me here?"

"Godsdamn, this is the stuff!"

Ashok turned to see Skagi half out of his chair, his hands pressed against the floor as if for balance. When he looked up, Ashok saw he was sweating, his eyes feverish, but he grinned at both of them.

"More?" Tatigan asked politely.

Skagi made a grab for his glass, missed, but picked it up on the second try. He waved it in the air.

“You can’t be drunk already?” Ashok said. “I’ve seen you drain four flagons that were each larger than this decanter without losing your wits.”

“Yes, but his body isn’t used to the *jhuild*,” Tatigan said. “Rashemi firewine.”

Ashok looked at Tatigan sharply. “This is from Rashemen?”

“Oh yes, I understand you’ll be making a journey there,” the merchant said with feigned nonchalance. “Did you know the Rashemi are the only people in Faerûn who make the *jhuild*? One decanter is worth more than the pair of you, so a trickle is all you get. Enjoy.”

His curiosity aroused, Ashok drained his glass. Immediately he felt the wine’s warmth in his blood, as potent as if he’d drunk half a bottle. The drink left a strange aftertaste on his tongue, making it feel thick and awkward in his mouth. He took a step forward and back to test his balance, but his reflexes didn’t seem to be as impaired as Skagi’s were. Yet when he lifted his hands, for a breath, his vision blurred and a tremor went through his hands. His heartbeat quickened, and a burning sensation spread through his chest, slowly at first, but then so fast he broke into a sweat. He couldn’t control his heartbeat.

“This isn’t wine,” he snarled. He braced a hand against the wall to keep from falling. “You poisoned us.”

“Of course I did.” Tatigan took Ashok’s glass and refilled it. Instead of handing it back to him, the merchant took a drink. “That’s what *jhuild* is—wine so potent it attacks your body. It won’t kill you, but your system fights with it, so you have to monitor your limits. But if you can find the right balance between kill and cure—and isn’t that the essence of liquor?—the *jhuild* will make you stronger. The berserkers drink it among the Rashemi.”

He was right. Ashok’s body slowly adapted to the effects of the drink. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. The Rashemi obviously didn’t brew the *jhuild* for flavor, at least not in the way other wines were carefully bottled and aged

to bring out their subtleties. This brew dominated the senses—the firewine masters me until my body masters it—then came the experience of flavors. Gods, he never knew there was such a thing as a battle with wine.

“Who are these berserkers?” Ashok said.

“The warriors of Rashemen,” Tatigan explained. “When we get there, you’ll likely meet them. They have fangs—battle groups—to protect every village in the country.”

“We?” Ashok said, surprised. “You’ll be on the caravan with us?”

“*Leading* the caravan, you mean.” Tatigan couldn’t keep the grin off his face. “For years I’ve attached myself to other crews to peddle my goods, but I’m tired of the small scale. I’ve started a venture with three other merchants, a coster caravan that’ll claim the Golden Way trade route as its own. We leave soon to beat the first snows in the North. Uwan tells me that, by happy coincidence, you have business in Rashemen with the wychlaran and need an escort, which I offered to provide.”

Ashok took back his glass from Tatigan. He swirled the liquid and watched it settle, taking in the color and vibrancy of the wine while he tried to take in Tatigan’s words. Firewine, berserkers, fangs—he wanted to know more about these Rashemi, but first, he needed to know how much Tatigan knew about his own mission into their country. “Did Uwan tell you what our business in Rashemen was?” he asked carefully.

“No, and I didn’t ask. As always, I serve the Watching Blade and the city of Ikemmu,” Tatigan said, offering a whimsical half bow. “Besides, it will be good to have as many skilled warriors as possible along for our first outing. Everyone benefits.”

Ashok took another drink—a sip this time—of the jhuild. He shuddered as the poisoned pleasure hit him. “Warriors that brew this drink could understand the shadar-kai,” he murmured.

Tatigan looked at him over the rim of his spectacles. "See now, that's why I'm glad you stopped by to see me, Ashok. You always say such interesting things."

"I don't know what you mean."

Tatigan went to his desk and sat on the edge. He lifted one of the parchment sheets. "I make the same observation here in my research." He read the text aloud. " 'Faerûn's native humans are ill-equipped to confront the driven nature of the shadar-kai, their motivations, and goals. Relationships, particularly trade relations, are by no means impossible—we have daily evidence of success—but the discord in their natures creates a barrier in social and cultural interactions. Of all the human peoples in Faerûn, the ones most suited to understand the shadar-kai are the Rashemi.' " He set the parchment back down.

"The history of Rashemen is fraught with war and strife," Tatigan went on. He pointed at the map on the wall. "Even their geography works against them. Look: Their southern neighbors, the Thayans, launched countless invasions over hundreds of years. From the East, the Tuigan horde did the same, to say nothing of the lost empires of Narfell and Raumathar—powers that used Rashemi land as a battleground. Despite all this, their people carve home and glory out of a harsh, isolated environment. They submit utterly to the authority of the *wychlaran*—witches—and reward their warriors for superior skill and fighting prowess. In battle, frenzy consumes their berserker warriors, a force that rivals the ecstasy of pain and suffering embraced by the children of Netheril, the shadar-kai. The great irony is that the isolated natures of both peoples would never allow one to seek out the other for an alliance."

"Until now," Ashok said.

"Precisely."

"Can we expect a fight from these berserkers?" Skagi said. Like Ashok, he'd regained his composure from the jhuil.

“That all depends,” Tatigan said. “They open their lands for trade caravans, though they never welcome outsiders with open arms. Shadar-kai have walked among them before as sellswords on caravan runs out from Ikemmu, so you’re nothing new to them—a curiosity perhaps, but nothing more.”

“This isn’t a trading mission for us. We’re approaching their people directly for aid,” Ashok said quietly. He took another sip of the red liquid. It burned on his lips. “That changes the game.”

“Indeed,” Tatigan said. “Honestly, I’m looking forward to seeing how all the pieces come together.”

“If our *relations* are poor, you’ll be in the middle of it,” Skagi pointed out.

“He’s right,” Ashok said. “Does your voice carry any weight among the Rashemi? Could you help us secure an audience with the witches?”

“The wychlaran don’t involve themselves with common trade matters,” Tatigan said. “The most I could do is talk to the local folk on your behalf, but it won’t make you less suspicious. No, in this you’re going to be on your own.”

If Ilvani was dreaming about a Rashemi witch, there had to be a reason for it. “We’ll just have to make them understand our need,” Ashok said.

Skagi held up his empty glass. “And get them to share their firewine.”

## CHAPTER SIX

**D**URING THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, **A**SHOK STAYED ON THE fringes of the caravan preparations. Reflecting the dynamic of the races in Ikemmu, there was little for him or the other shadar-kai to do—this stage of the journey belonged to the merchants of the coster caravan.

The plan as Uwan had laid it out with Tatigan was for Ashok, Skagi, Cree, and Ilvani to escort Tatigan, accompanied by three other merchants and their personal guards, through the Underdark side of the city. They and the rest of the crew, including the drovers and the wagons, would then use a portal to transport themselves and the trade cargo to the surface of Faerûn.

Tatigan and several other wealthy merchants in Ikemmu paid a bloated sum in coin to maintain the portal in order to transport cargo. Of course, the magic that powered the portal was unstable—all the merchants knew that. More often than not, they lost cargo, and sometimes entire wagons were transported across half of Faerûn in the opposite direction from where they intended to go, but most of the merchants felt it was worth the risk to avoid losing half their yearly incomes to drow raiding parties.

In the meantime, though, Ashok did not sit idle. He had his own tasks to complete, his own preparations to make. And though it pained him, the first thing he did was return to the forges and the scene of Olra's murder.

He found the woman he and Olra had rescued at work alone by the fire. Clerics had healed her wounds, but Ashok noticed a small tattoo of a black snake wound around her arm, just below where the creature had bitten her.

She worked meticulously and with such concentration that she didn't notice when Ashok entered the hut. She held a

length of red-glowing metal in gloved hands, a fiery brand that would become a sword when she finished molding it.

The woman turned and saw him. She had dark hair drawn into a tail away from her face. A pair of silver studs pierced her nose, and across her collarbone was another tattoo—a length of spiked chain not unlike his own.

“I wondered when you’d come back,” she said. Her voice was gentle, at odds with the harsh forge fire and the gleaming brand she held up between them. The red fire reflected in her black eyes.

“I left my weapon behind,” Ashok said.

The unforged weapon drew his gaze. The metal was hot enough to sear flesh, yet she held the brand up close to her face without flinching, studying every curve, each imperfection in the metal.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” the forge master said. “I find I like the metal best in this shape—unforged, barely more than a thought.”

“I’d always heard the blacksmith loves the finished weapon best,” Ashok observed.

“Oh, there’s beauty in that, too, and a blood bond between the forger and the blade. But in this breath, the metal is only what we make of it in our thoughts. It’s perfect in a way it never will be again. We bend and shape it, so malleable, even though it has the power to burn us down. There is always the risk that the fire will maim us and master us.”

“And there lies the joy,” Ashok murmured.

“For all shadar-kai,” the woman said. “I see in my mind now the warrior who will claim this blade. She haunts my dreams, whispering to me to curve the steel inward, shape the hilt thus and so. She is quite demanding.”

“You know who she is?” Ashok asked.

“No,” the woman said, “and I likely never will. It’s not my place to know where the weapons go when they leave my forge, but I dream of the wonders they’ve seen, the blood they’ve tasted in battle.” She blinked, as if coming out of a

trance. "Oh, and my name is Kerthta. Forgive my manner, but I don't converse with many people. May I know you?"

"I'm Ashok. How is your arm?"

She touched the tattoo, and a fleeting emotion crossed her face, too quickly hidden for Ashok to identify it. "I'm healed. I wear this to honor the leader of the Camborrs."

Something in the way she said the title struck Ashok. "Did you know Olra?" he asked.

Kerthta nodded. "I wear the snake to honor her. I claim no part in its defeat."

And something else became clear to Ashok then, as he replayed the memory of Olra running toward the forge huts and raising the alarm, the desperation in her cry. Ashok had never stopped to wonder at it, at why she'd been afraid when she should have been charging into battle exhilarated. And her eagerness to kill the snake ... Now Ashok knew what drove her.

"You honor her well," Ashok said.

The woman didn't answer. She went to the wall next to the forge and removed his spiked chain from a peg. She brought it to him, and Ashok saw in the firelight that she'd cleaned and sharpened the spikes to razor points. There was more—an odd sheen reflected from the metal, but he attributed it to the wavering firelight.

"I once wielded a similar weapon, before I trained for the forge," the woman said. She let the links dangle from her hands like rolls of silk. "As I honor Olra, so I try to do the same when I give this weapon back to you. It is more than it was. I've placed magic in the steel that can cut where it would never have cut before. May you treat it better than you treated Olra."

Reaching for the weapon, Ashok stopped and let his hands fall. He went cold inside. "I didn't mean to let her die. I did everything I could to prevent it."

"I'm not talking about that," Kerthta said. "You heard her final wishes, and so did I. They were the words of a friend,



yet you discarded them.”

Ashok’s face flushed with shame and anger. “I couldn’t control the shadow snake. A Camborr must always control or, if he cannot, kill. Olra’s rule.”

“So you did. You killed the snake.”

“Not soon enough.”

“Make no mistake, Ashok, the hands of the forge masters guide the weapons of Ikemmu as surely as if we wielded them ourselves,” Kerthta said. “I tell you, you fought well and bear no shame.”

“I keep my own counsel where my battles are concerned,” Ashok said. “Olra was dying. She chose me for an honor I don’t deserve.”

Kerthta shook her head in disgust. “Then take your weapon and go.” She dropped his chain in the dirt.

Jaw clenched, Ashok bent and retrieved it. His pride almost caused him to leave the chain behind, but he knew he would need it for what lay ahead. He left the hut.

Ashok sought out Neimal just after the Monril bell. Having retrieved one weapon, Ashok reflected with grim humor that it was time to reclaim another.

He found Neimal by the city gate, issuing instructions to the Guardians who were about to go out to their posts at the Shadowfell portal.

“Your friend is still out there,” she said when Ashok approached. “I don’t like having my portal Guardians stand out on the plain listening to that beast’s screaming. I’ve had to shorten the guard shifts because of it.”

“It’s my fault,” Ashok said. “I should have done something about him before now. That’s what I came to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” Neimal raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were going off with the caravan to the mirror world.”

“I am,” Ashok said, “but I want to take the nightmare with me.”

Neimal laughed. Ashok had never heard the witch show true amusement, but her voice was full of it now. “You’re the craziest shadar-kai I’ve ever encountered, Ashok, and I’ve seen some interesting things guarding this wall. Taking a nightmare on a caravan run full of humans and horses—I wonder which one of them will bolt first?”

“That’s why I need your help,” Ashok said. He could feel the excitement building in his blood. He hadn’t felt this alive in days and wished he could thank some creature other than the nightmare for it. “I need you to put an enchantment on the beast, as you did for me once before. But this time I need an illusion to make it look like a normal horse.”

“It won’t matter how normal the thing looks or acts—the caravan crew will sense the aura of terror it projects,” Neimal said. “The horses will feel it first and break their harnesses, and then the humans will react. Their dreams will drive them mad.”

“The nightmare has always targeted me with its visions,” Ashok said. “Their dreams will be safe. As for the rest, can you give me a spell to mask its aura? Something to outlast the journey?”

The witch pursed her lips. “No spell I cast will last that long. There is an item I can give you, but it’s highly valuable. If anything were to happen to it—”

“A risk,” Ashok agreed, “but think of what you’ll gain in return. The nightmare won’t trouble your Guardians anymore.”

“You’ll leave the beast in Faerûn?” Neimal said.

“The nightmare goes where it wants. I’ve never had any control over that.”

“Why do you want to take it?” she said. “All this time, you could have gone out to the plain to ride the beast, yet you never did. Now you want to take it to Faerûn.”

“When Ilvani and the nightmare came together out on the plain, the beast fought off the madness that gripped it,” Ashok said. “If the spirits attack us when we get to

Rashemen, the nightmare will be able to warn me by its actions. I'll know to be ready."

He'd thought the plan over carefully during the past few days. Although familiar with the shadow beasts of the plain, Ashok knew nothing of the creatures of Rashemen. The telthors, whatever they were, might react with violence toward Ilvani the same way the spectral panthers and shadow snakes had. If that happened, Ashok wanted warning and all the powers he could muster for defense.

Neimal considered his words, and finally she nodded. "Come back at the Tet bell," she told him. "I'll have the item for you then. Its suppression aura is continuous as long as it touches the nightmare's flesh. I'll weave the illusion into it when you bring the beast into the city."

"My thanks," Ashok said.

"Tempus go with you, Ashok," Neimal said.

Ashok nodded, though as far as he was concerned, Tempus could stay in Ikemmu. The city needed Him more than Ashok did.



Later, Ashok stood on the Shadowfell plain, more than two miles from the portal and the Guardians who stood watch. They'd offered him aid, thinking he meant to tame the nightmare with his chain. They had no idea the stallion was waiting for him.

But maybe I have a few surprises for him, Ashok thought.

From his pouch, Ashok took out the item Neimal had given him before he left the city: a necklace of yellowish bone spurs threaded onto a thin metal chain and magically altered by the witch to fit around the nightmare's neck. Neimal told him if he could get it on the stallion, the necklace would suppress his aura of terror down to the blood.

Ashok hoped it was impervious to fire.

The necklace in one hand, Ashok fingered the spikes of his chain with the other. He thought he felt warmth from the metal, but he passed it off as the heat from his body infecting the chain. His thoughts filled with strategies of defense and the option for retreat if it came to that.

In his heart, he knew neither of them would back down. The anticipation built to an ache, his tense muscles ready to fight. And it would be a fight—a brutal one. The nightmare would make Ashok earn his service.

A speck of movement appeared on the horizon. Ashok drew in a breath and let it out. Time slowed down, and every sound on the desolate plain faded to silence. In that breath of utter peace, he heard the distant pound of hooves against the cracked soil.

One, two, three, four went his breaths on the air—the fiery hooves struck the ground, the blacksmith smote her anvil and forged her weapon. They were all in Ashok’s mind—the city beneath him, the sky above him, and he and the nightmare in between, on the edge—the breath between action and inaction.

He remembered experiencing this same sensation with Vedoran on the bridges between Pyton and Hevalor. He’d been a separate entity then, too, utterly alone and yet surrounded by Ikemmu. These moments, the small eternities, the spaces in which entire lives were lived—shadar-kai lives.

These moments belong to no gods, Ashok thought. They are only mine.

The nightmare came across the plain with mane and tail ablaze, the beast an exhilarating mass of coordinated muscles and graceful steps. Once within sight of Ashok, the nightmare slowed and tensed, nostrils flaring in question.

He’s looking for Ilvani, Ashok realized. He remembers that pain.

Holding the necklace loose in his hand, Ashok came toward the beast to reassure him that he’d indeed come

alone. The nightmare snorted and put his nose against Ashok's chest, taking in his scent.

"That's right," Ashok said. "No one but you and I—no one around to see if we kill each other out here."

Whickering, the nightmare regarded him with his red eyes, and Ashok wondered, not for the first time, how much the beast could actually understand him. Was the nightmare intelligent enough to comprehend speech, or was their relationship purely instinctual, a shared bond of blood and death?

"You understand well enough to know that I want something from you," Ashok said. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't need you."

The line of flames that ran up and down the beast's spine dimmed somewhat, which to Ashok meant calm. But the heat was a constant presence, a promise of violence. Ashok gripped his chain and carefully raised the bone spur necklace.

He saw a flash, the whites of the nightmare's eyes, but by then it was too late. The beast reared into the air and kicked. Ashok saved himself at the last second by angling his body to the right. The blow glanced off his left shoulder, but the force drove Ashok to the ground.

Instinctively, he rolled away, but the nightmare didn't attack again. He knew that pursuing Ashok inevitably meant tasting his spiked chain. Instead, he danced back, and the flame burned bright and hot from his back.

Coughing, Ashok sat up. His arm was numb from shoulder to elbow, except when he tried to move it. Then his shattered bones grated against each other and made Ashok's vision go dark around the edges. He gasped with the pain of it. He couldn't let himself lose consciousness—he needed the pain as he needed the nightmare's trust.

He stood and faced the nightmare again, his dead arm dangling at his side. "So the direct approach isn't going to

work, eh?" he asked the stallion. "It's all right. I thought you'd say no at first. Let me convince you."

The spiked chain came up, then down. Spikes tore up the dirt at the nightmare's feet. The beast jumped away, but Ashok followed, driving the beast in a circle. His chain clipped his front forelock, and the nightmare screamed loudly, a sound that momentarily deafened Ashok.

The scream died away, but the disorienting effect left him dizzy and fighting the fear aura. He came on the attack again, but he stepped sluggishly. The nightmare saw the advantage and charged in beneath the reach of Ashok's chain.

At close range, there was biting and fire. Ashok dodged the beast's mouth, but the nightmare slammed into him with his body, burning Ashok's cheek and barely missing his eyes and mouth. He fell again, blistered skin scraping the ground. Ashok breathed heavily and took in this newest source of agony. Waves of pain shuddered through him, but the injuries weren't debilitating. He'd far from reached his limits. The nightmare knew that as well as he did.

Ashok got up. The problem had become apparent to him at the same time his face was being ground into the dirt. He had two hands, but with a broken arm, he would never be able to manipulate his chain and throw the enchantment over the beast's head. The nightmare would make him fight with one or the other, and the necklace was a poor choice for a weapon.

Or was it?

Deliberately, Ashok snapped his chain in the air to get the nightmare's attention. The beast whickered softly—amused, Ashok thought—at the display but did not retreat. Then, instead of attacking, Ashok draped the necklace over his own head. He had no idea how the magic would affect him, but wearing the necklace served two purposes. The nightmare would know that the necklace contained no killing magic, and now Ashok was free to wield his chain.

Using his good hand, he threw one end toward the beast, snapped it back with the other, and immediately followed up the feint by charging straight at the beast.

Again, his world exploded in pain.

Ashok dropped to his knees as a dozen needles stabbed him simultaneously in the chest. He looked down to see the bone spurs burrowing into his flesh. They passed through his clothing and bone scale armor, pinning the plates to his chest as if they were parchment. His heart stuttered, and Ashok suddenly couldn't get his breath.

Maybe he'd been wrong—perhaps it was killing magic after all, or at least a spell meant for a much larger creature than a shadar-kai.

The nightmare circled him. Ashok wondered why the stallion hadn't closed in for the kill, but then he realized his sudden collapse must have confused the beast. He expected another feint, a trick to lure him close to Ashok. That suspicion probably saved Ashok.

He planted his feet and tried to stand. The ground tilted and blurred with the sky. The disorientation wasn't from the pain, though that was intense enough to demand his attention. It was the magic coursing through his body. Neimal hadn't lied—it went to the blood. To experiment, he tried focusing his mind to teleport behind the nightmare. Nothing happened. His body was as solid as ever—and as vulnerable.

The nightmare narrowed his circle, hooves pawing the ground in anticipation of another charge. Ashok knew he would have one chance to react when the beast came near. All or nothing, burn or fly.

He staggered, and this time the nightmare took the bait, surging in to knock Ashok aside. Ashok absorbed the blow as fire licked along his ribs. Reaching up, Ashok wrapped his bad arm around the beast's neck. His hand passed through flame. The burn and pain of broken bones drove him to the edge of unconsciousness, but he held on. With his other

hand, he ripped off the enchanted necklace, tearing the bone spurs from his flesh. He heard a loud roaring and realized it was his own voice screaming in pain and triumph. He slipped the necklace over the nightmare's head and released it.

Gasping, burning, Ashok collapsed on the ground. He rolled feebly back and forth to extinguish the flames on his cloak and back. Above him, the nightmare bucked and thrashed to try to get the necklace off, but it was too late. The bone spurs dug into his flesh, and the stallion screamed in fury and pain. Hooves smashed the ground inches from his head, but Ashok had no strength to roll away. Instead, he simply stared up at the beast and let him decide to kill him or not.

The nightmare continued to thrash for several minutes more, but gradually, his struggles grew weaker, until he looked more irritated than savage. After a while, the beast just stood still, snorting his foul breath on the air, as if unsure of how to react to the necklace, whether to regard it as a threat or a trick. One thing the nightmare hadn't done was scream, but Ashok didn't know whether that meant the beast couldn't or whether he knew on some level that that power wouldn't work anymore.

Ashok still danced on the edge of unconsciousness, but he managed to sit up and pull his chain close. He needed to have enough focus to teleport if the beast came after him again.

But the battle appeared to be over. The nightmare regarded Ashok warily but didn't try to attack. His fire burned purplish blue against the roots of his mane. Ashok wondered if the necklace also suppressed his flames. He doubted it. The fire was part of the beast. That was why the flames couldn't harm the nightmare's flesh—they came from within.

Ashok looked down at the blistered flesh of his dead arm, the puncture wounds from the necklace, and wondered what



his victory would be worth, in the end. He gazed at the nightmare and saw—Ashok told himself he must be imagining it—the wicked pleasure in the beast’s eyes. Ashok read the expression plainly. *You may have bound me, it said, but now we’re brothers again.*

Ashok didn’t need the beast’s aura to be afraid.

The beast let Ashok approach and climb onto his back. Gripping fistfuls of mane, Ashok fell forward against the nightmare’s neck, careful not to dislodge the bone spurs. His broken arm throbbed, and the burns caused waves of nausea to roll over him. He needed to stay conscious. The nightmare would not hesitate to dump him off if he lost his grip.

Despite the pain, the ride back to the portal was another world. The nightmare ran full out, as if he could outrun the collar around his neck. The gray shadows of the plain passed before Ashok’s eyes like smoke.

He brought the nightmare back into Ikemmu. Neimal and a cleric from Makthar waited for him at the gate.

“I thought you might need a prayer or two,” the witch said. She looked him over. “Any longer and you would have needed a resurrection.”

Ashok let the cleric lay hands on him. The pain slowly faded away, and when the cleric was finished, Ashok flexed his mended arm. “My thanks,” he said.

“Thank Tempus,” the cleric said.

“Of course.” Hours ago, Ashok declared to himself he didn’t need Tempus. He was a hypocrite after all.

He heard Neimal chanting. He looked up to see the witch make a gesture in the air around the nightmare. A breath passed in which Ashok’s vision blurred. He blinked, and the nightmare was gone. In his place stood a tall brown stallion, thick-bodied with tan fetlocks. The only evidence of his true nature was in the black roots of his mane.

Ashok stood next to the beast and ran his hands along his brown flank. He felt nothing of the aura of fear that he

usually experienced in the nightmare's presence, but his appearance was by far the most disturbing change.

"He looks almost pure," Ashok murmured.

Neimal shrugged. "Humans and dumb beasts often see what they expect to see and nothing more," she said. "But you will never forget what this creature can do, will you Ashok?"

He wouldn't forget. Ashok knew the beast at least as well as he knew himself.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

ILVANI AWOKE IN HER CHAMBER. SHE'D DREAMED OF A BROWN horse. Something about it frightened her, but she didn't know what. She rolled over and tried to sleep again, but the room was hot, and her linen shirt stuck uncomfortably to her skin. Giving up, she got out of bed and walked barefoot to the ladder that rested against her window ledge. She climbed up, tucked her legs close to her chin, and leaned against the window. Outside, the city went about its business, all sound muffled by the glass.

"Never more peaceful than now," she said. "They're so small, how could they hurt anybody?"

"But you hurt yourselves—it's your nature."

Ilvani looked up and saw a reflection in the window. The woman from the plain, the snow rabbit who'd disappeared into the storm, gazed back at her. When Ilvani turned, she stood on the ladder, her arms crossed on the topmost rung.

"You're still dead," Ilvani said. "Go away, snow rabbit."

"You called me that before—why?" the woman asked. Her face scrunched up in consternation, but her eyes didn't change—they were still dead.

"I saw it. The snow rabbit-spirit used to watch over you when you were a little girl," Ilvani said.

The woman looked shaken. "How did you know that?"

"Someone whispered it to me. I don't remember who." What was it like for other shadar-kai, the ones who didn't have to wonder what was real and what was a trick played by the shadows?

The woman started to come onto the ledge. She got a knee up on the stone before she saw Ilvani's malevolent expression. Slowly, she lowered her leg.

"We're not friends, are we?" the woman said. She didn't sound angry, only curious. "You don't like me."

“The storm swallowed you,” Ilvani said, “but you keep coming back. You put things in my head, and I don’t have any room for them.” She opened her green pouch and took out the boxes, all the captured memories, and spread them before her. “These are all that matter,” she insisted.

The woman reached down and picked up a small wooden box with a gold latch. For a moment, her eyes seemed to come alive with a stream of thoughts. “I remember something like this,” she said. She stroked the smooth lid, a light wood inlaid with darker squares like a chessboard. “What do you keep in it?”

Ilvani reached across the space between them and opened the latch. She lifted the box lid, and the memory washed over her as if it were newly born.

She was learning magic. The woman who taught her—Ilvani couldn’t see her face—held a wilted rose in her hand. Ilvani saw herself wanting the dead flower, but the woman held it out of reach. Why wouldn’t she let her touch the petals? What was she hiding?

The woman made a gesture, and suddenly the rose sprang to life again, its petals red and dew-covered. Thorns grew from the stem, and Ilvani thought they would puncture her teacher’s skin. That was when she realized it was all an illusion. There was no rose. How could there be? Nothing like that ever grew on the Shadowfell.

“The day I learned that witches lie,” Ilvani said. She stared at the woman on the ladder—what had Ashok and the halfling called her?—the Rashemi. “That’s what I keep in the box.”

The witch on the ladder nodded thoughtfully. “Well, then, if we’re not friends, I suppose I’ll have to die again.” She slammed the box lid down on Ilvani’s fingers.

Ilvani cried out in pain and tried to free her hand, but the woman was all over her now, arms grasping and tearing at her hair. Her fingers elongated, and her nails became viciously sharp claws. The more Ilvani struggled, the more

monstrous the Rashemi witch became. Her jawbone stretched, and her body warped into an emaciated husk, all the life sucked out of her at once.

"Please," she croaked. "Help me. It's coming ... for me." She wrapped skeletal arms around Ilvani's neck and pressed withered lips to her mouth.

The kiss filled Ilvani's mind with chaotic images. One breath she was in the pine tree forest where she'd first met the woman, and the next she soared high above a mountain range. When she looked down, she saw a white dragon fly up to meet her, but the scene changed again before she had time to be afraid. She saw a village on the shores of a lake. Boats with no helmsmen drifted through a thick mist. An owl flew out of the white cloud, its wings grazing the water. Then came another, and another. Symbols covered their bodies. Light so bright it burned Ilvani's eyes flashed from the markings.

Ilvani shoved the dead woman away from her and fell off the window ledge. When she opened her eyes, she was in her bed. She got up quickly and looked around. She even climbed the ladder to look out her window, but she was alone in the room.

Except for the symbols that still burned behind her eyes. She had to get rid of them. Her trembling hands sought her knife from the table beside her bed, but it wasn't there. She tried to remember what had happened to it. Oh yes. It was out on the Shadowfell plain. Ashok took it from her. He'd told her not to hurt herself.

She looked down at the bandages on her arms. Her fingernails grazed the stiff material, and it took every ounce of her strength not to tear the bandages away, to carve the symbols into her arms with her bare hands. Put them anywhere but behind her eyes, eating away at her thoughts....

No, and then, aloud, "No." Saying the word made her resolve real, gave it power, even if her voice was a feeble

whisper. “No.” The halfling had tended her wounds. She’d been kind. It was wrong to repay that kindness with blood.

Ilvani remembered her time at Darnae’s shop better than she remembered the shadows in her boxes. She wished she could go back there, but she didn’t know the way. That wasn’t her place, anyway. Her place was moving, she was moving, and she couldn’t stop the current from carrying her away.

She went back to bed, even though she knew she would not sleep.



The night before the caravan was to leave for Faerûn, Ashok, Skagi, and Cree—released finally from his prison at Tower Makthar—walked out to the training yard for Olra’s funeral.

Later, there would be celebrating and fierce dancing to see them off on their long journey, but Uwan had declared this hour the time to honor the head of the Camborrs.

Magic shrouded the lights of Tower Athanon and the surrounding area. The gathered warriors were indistinct shadows, but Ashok made out Uwan, Neimal, and the other Sworn standing near the fence. Guardians, new recruits, and Camborrs stood side by side in silence.

Then, out of the tower came a solemn procession. Six shadar-kai carried a wooden bier between them, three to a side. Olra’s body lay upon it, her form covered from head to foot in white cloth.

Skagi had explained the ritual to him. In Ikemmu, the shadar-kai did not look upon the faces of their dead during the funerary rites. To do so was to glorify the shell, the soulless frame that no longer held the essence of the warrior. Instead, they prayed aloud, using their voices to propel her spirit to the realm of her god. Ashok heard them now, each shadar-kai in the crowd murmuring in a low undertone his or her own private prayer. In this breath, the religions of

Ikemmu were truly equal—no matter which god they prayed to, the gathered crowd spoke for Olra's soul.

Ashok found he had trouble remembering how his old enclave had honored their dead, if they had done so at all.

Behind the procession walked more shadar-kai. Ashok recognized the forge masters. They wore dark robes and carried swords in their hands, the points facing down toward the ground.

Tempus's symbol, the swords were works of art, breathtaking and deadly. Kerthta came last. She carried a sword and Olra's barbed whip clasped together in her hands. The whip still bore the blood of the snake. She wore no expression of grief and stood stoically when those in the procession halted and placed their burden on an unlit pyre in the center of the training yard. Then the six bearers turned and formed a line at the head of the bier.

The forge masters spread out to form a loose circle around the pyre. They turned the sword hilts so the blades pierced the sky. Kerthta approached the body and placed the whip and sword together across Olra's breast.

The Watching Blade himself came forward then, bearing a lit torch, its flame surrounded by black spikes like a steel flower unfurling. He handed the torch to Kerthta.

"In the halls of Warriors' Rest, Olra waits for us," Uwan said. His voice carried over the crowd. "Tonight all shadar-kai of Ikemmu celebrate the passage of the soul," Uwan said. "In life, we struggle always to bind spirit to flesh, to deny the lurking shadows their claim on our souls. Olra won her battle, and now her god Tempus calls her home."

Ashok felt the tension in the air when Uwan spoke these words. The gathered crowd knew that Olra had worshiped Tempus; their leader's words were appropriate, but they couldn't fail to hear the fervor in Uwan's voice when he spoke of the warrior god. Uwan might change Ikemmu's laws to accommodate other religions, but it was clear the leader still personally favored Tempus's children. Silently, Ashok

cursed Uwan for a fool. The city would never stand united while its leader valued Tempus above all.

“Tonight we celebrate, for Olra’s soul has found rest and peace at last,” Uwan said. “The rest of us struggle on, and by the gods’ will, we will join her someday, when our time comes.”

The prayers of the crowd wound down, and Kerthta stepped forward to light the funeral pyre. Ashok saw Neimal make a gesture, and the flames glowed blue-white and soared high toward the cavern ceiling. They consumed Olra’s body and illuminated the faces of the watching shadar-kai. The forge master, Olra’s lover, looked on and, by the light of the pyre, Ashok saw the grief break through, not in her face, but in the way she reached up to clasp her arm where the snake had bitten her.

Then it was over. The blaze gradually burned down to a few small fires as the crowd began to disperse. Ashok briefly considered approaching Kerthta, who hadn’t moved from her place at Olra’s pyre, but he decided against it. The moment was hers. He would not intrude.

He couldn’t change the past. All he could do was look ahead to the morrow. Ilvani had told him once to value his friends and to keep them safe. Ashok would do all he could to help Ilvani, as she had once helped him.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

AT THE MONRIL BELL, ASHOK, SKAGI, AND CREE WERE AWAKE, dressed, and ready. Ashok promised to meet the brothers at the caravan staging area. He made a brief stop to say goodbye to Darnae because the halfling had asked it of him, and then he went on to Ilvani's chambers to see if the witch wanted an escort through the Veil that separated the two halves of the city.

He knocked on her chamber door but got no answer, and he sensed no life within the room. She was already gone. Ashok felt a brief disappointment, but then he moved on to the Camborr pens.

The nightmare stood in his cage, his nose against the iron bars. Though Neimal's spell made the beast appear in the guise of a common stallion, there was no disguising the intense beauty of the creature or the hatred in his eyes.

Ashok removed the lock and swung open the cage door. "You knew I wouldn't leave you here," he said. "You know I'll give you the blood you crave."

The nightmare came out of the cage and walked up to Ashok. He felt the beast's warmth, an unnatural heat that filled the small space. Anyone standing nearby would be able to tell something was wrong with Ashok's "horse." He would have to remember that and keep others away.

Ashok led the nightmare through the city, and together they walked through the portal to the Underdark side of Ikemmu.

A strange mirror to the Shadowfell, this city had long been dominated by the trader races and by extension was more hospitable to outsiders and the comforts they sought. The towers were much the same, but the stone buildings below were newer and softer around the edges than the burned-out ruins on the Shadowfell side. The population here was

more numerous, which made Ashok uncomfortable. It seemed to him he was constantly elbowing through a crowd.

The caravan mustering ground was a large open space near Tower Hevalor—Ashok wondered if the names were the same on this side. He'd never thought to ask Skagi or Cree about this.

He saw the brothers standing with a group of humans and shadar-kai. The group checked tack and wagons and prepared to harness the horses for a procession through the portal. Ashok was vaguely surprised to see Tuva and Vlahna among the shadar-kai.

Skagi and Cree waved him over, and Tuva nodded when he saw him.

"Tatigan's up front with the other merchants," Skagi said, and added, "Caravan's bigger than I expected."

"Tuva and Vlahna have led caravan missions in Faerûn, or so I heard," Cree said. "Uwan put them in charge of all the guards, including the humans."

Ashok noticed that Cree, true to his word, had been to the inker sometime after Olra's funeral. A serpentine tattoo with delicate black scales curved around his cheekbone and across his closed left eyelid, which was heavily scarred and had no lashes. The tattoo ended in a snake's head just above his left eyebrow.

"Have you seen Ilvani?" Ashok asked. "I went to her chambers, but she'd already left."

Skagi looked around and pointed. "She's there, talking to Daruk."

Ashok followed his gaze and saw a dark-skinned human in breeches and a deep gray tunic. He smiled when he spoke to Ilvani, but the witch's face was impassive.

"Who is he?" Ashok asked.

"He's my bard."

They turned and saw Tatigan. The merchant spoke to two of the human guards and sent them off to stow extra gear in

the wagons. Then he took off his spectacles and cleaned them on his sleeve. His eyes were bright with anticipation.

"You travel with your own bard?" Cree said.

"No wonder the caravan's so big, if he brings all the home comforts with him." Skagi snickered.

"Oh yes, Daruk went on several caravan runs with me, back when I operated alone," Tatigan said. "When I formed this little coster operation, he was the first one I asked along on the journey. I think you'll find him interesting, perhaps even helpful, company. In fact, this whole venture promises to be very interesting. I simply hope I have enough parchment to record it all."

Tatigan walked away, grinning.

Ashok watched the other shadar-kai as they formed the horses and wagons up into a line. He counted six of them, and though the human guards far outnumbered them, the shadar-kai warriors looked seasoned and deadly.

The caravan lined up to move two abreast and eleven deep, with guards at various points on all sides. Vlahna determined guard placements and ordered everyone to their positions so she could survey how secure the caravan would be and if there were any weak points. She kept the six shadar-kai together in one group and ordered them to the front. Ashok, Cree, and Skagi she sent to guard their backs. Ilvani would ride in the rear wagon as spell support if necessary.

Ashok saw a shadar-kai cleric among the contingent at the front, and a human cleric of Tymora rode in one of the wagons. Tuva and Vlahna took up roving positions on either side of the caravan.

"What of these shadar-kai guards?" Ashok said to the brothers as they went to their posts. "Do you know them?"

"Not by name. Sellswords," Skagi said, with an edge of distaste.

"How many of them?"

"All six, as far as we know," Cree said. "They're all affiliated either with Tatigan or one of the other merchants."

"Why didn't they join the military when Uwan lifted the ban?" Ashok said.

"I don't know, but they're not the only ones," Cree said. "There's an entire faction of shadar-kai who kept their old professions. I heard rumors Uwan's decision caused a stir among some of the merchants. Lifting the ban on military service caused them to lose some of their best warriors, and they had to offer the rest more coin as an incentive to stay."

"More coin's one thing, but they can't feel too kindly toward us that used to call them Blites, either," Skagi said.

"Some still do," Cree said, with a pointed glance at his brother. Ashok nodded. It made sense. He'd been naïve to assume that all shadar-kai would want the honor of service to Ikemmu, that they would willingly go where they hadn't been welcome before and where they might still be scorned. The city had a long, delicate road ahead.

"Eyes to the front!" Tuva called to the gathered crew. "We're breaths away from the Diteen bell, and that's the signal to move out. I want no stragglers through the portal. Remember, departing caravans use this location on every run, so ambushers know exactly where to lie in wait for us. When we go through, we're vulnerable, so I want weapons out and eyes on the hills. For those of you just joining us on this little parade"—he shot a glance at Ashok, Skagi, and Cree—"the place where we're coming out has low hills for a mile or so; then it's flat country along the Clearflow River to the north. The good news is that means we'll have fresh water and game to hunt, so we won't have to eat into our supplies. The bad news is that it's open ground, and with winter coming on fast, we'll have bitterly cold days and nights that'll make you wish you were back fighting the dust storms on the Shadowfell. But make no mistake, friends, this is the easiest part of the journey." Tuva smiled, exposing a gap between his two front teeth. "Once we join up with the

Golden Way and head for the Sunrise Mountains, things are going to get a lot more interesting."

Ilvani came to join them. She wore a heavy black dress and her cloak with its drape of chains. Her green pouch hung at her waist as usual, and she carried an extra pack on her back. She climbed into the back of the wagon and sat down. Ashok tried to catch her eye, but she didn't acknowledge him.

"Greetings, Ilvani," he said. "Are you ready for the journey?"

She looked up at him. Her eyes were still heavy with fatigue. He could see the bandages poking out of the sleeves of her dress. Ashok hoped she hadn't added any new wounds since he'd seen her last.

"She died again last night," Ilvani said. "The storm turned her into a living corpse. I can't get the smell out of my room."

"You had another dream?" Ashok said.

She looked away. It was answer enough.

"We'll fix it," Ashok said. He put as much confidence as he could into the words.

Tatigan and Tuva were speaking at the front of the pack. Ashok saw four others with him: a human man and woman who stood close together, a dwarf with black hair and beard braided through with streaks of gray, and a human man who stood a little apart.

These must be the other merchants, though the young human didn't look old enough or confident enough to be master of anything, Ashok mused. His gaze darted between Tuva and Tatigan, as if he didn't know what to make of either the grizzled shadar-kai warrior or the eccentric merchant. The man and woman beckoned to him then, and the young one went to join them. When they stood together, Ashok saw a resemblance among the three that marked them as one family. The young man had his father's stance and slenderness, but he had his mother's deep brown hair and

eyes. Tatigan turned then and spoke to the family, and they listened attentively.

The dwarf, as far as Ashok could see, stayed silent through the whole conference. Though he appeared to pay attention to the proceedings, he kept shooting glances at the horse and wagon preparations. Once or twice, he went to help the guards by separating two incompatible horses or helping tie down crates and barrels that weren't quite secure in the back of the high-walled wagons.

A veteran, Ashok thought in approval. Tatigan's coster may have been a new arrangement, but there were people on board who knew what they were doing. That was a hopeful sign for their success.

"He's right about the portal," Cree said. "I overheard some of the humans talking—a group of them paid for passage with the caravan beyond Rashemen—about the portal being in one spot for too long. Bandits are leaving their scouts in the hills to watch for caravans from the Underdark. They know the wagons will be fully stocked, so when one comes through, they send word to their fellows to set up an ambush."

"What about guards on the other side of the portal?" Ashok said.

"We have them," Cree said, "but secrecy is a more effective weapon, according to them. I agree."

"I've heard worse tales," Skagi said. "Wagons snatched as soon as they come out of the portal. They kill the guards, drovers, and steer the horses into the hills before anyone can get his breeches in order."

As Skagi spoke, Vlahna passed near them on her horse. She rode bareback and had a shortbow slung over her shoulder in addition to the chain wrapped around her arm. "You won't have to fear that happening with Tuva," she said. "He'll pose as drover on the lead wagon and make any attacker pay a steep price if they want to make off with it."

“No matter what we do, we’ll have to fight off our share of bandits,” Ashok said. Looking at the three shadar-kai, he could tell that none was about to complain. An eventful journey was a successful journey, in their eyes, for it meant they never had to worry about fading into oblivion.

Vlahna sidled her horse closer to Ashok’s mount. He saw her animal’s nostrils flare, then it tossed its head as if it smelled something unnatural. Ashok tensed, half expecting it to cry an alarm, but the horse just edged away.

Vlahna laughed. “I guess she doesn’t like you,” she said, addressing the disguised nightmare. “Can’t imagine why—you’re stunning.” She put out a hand to pat the horse’s neck, but Ashok pulled on his reins to draw the stallion out of reach. Vlahna looked at him questioningly.

“He doesn’t like anyone,” Ashok said.

“Except you?”

“No, he especially hates me,” Ashok said. “But we have an understanding.”

She laughed again, spurred her horse with her knees, and rode away. Ashok saw Skagi and Cree watch her go. At the front of the line, Tatigan and Tuva had finished their conference with the other merchants and were taking their places in the wagons.

“Prepare to move out!” Vlahna called to the assembly. “All of you, mind your horses and weapons, keep your eyes open, and—above all—keep to your stations. Tymora give us all a kiss and a smile.”

With those words, she took her bow off her shoulder and nocked an arrow. Ashok readied his chain, and the brothers fell in beside him on their horses. The rest of the caravan either rode on horseback or took cover in the wagons. Ashok noted with interest the tension in the body language of the other races, and the relaxed, almost playful atmosphere among the shadar-kai—all except Ilvani. The witch sat with a vacant expression.

Skagi leaned over. "A kiss and a smile? Is she offering, do you think?"

Ashok and Cree laughed. "You're not getting either," Cree said.

"Well, what do you think, pup? Are you ready to taste Faerûnian air?" Skagi slapped Ashok on the shoulder.

Ashok glanced at Ilvani. She met his gaze and said, "I put on my boots."

"I suppose that's something," Ashok said. "Let's go."



As he passed through the portal, Ashok looked up and saw the gray, cloud-heavy sky. His first feeling on seeing a sky so similar to that of the Shadowfell was one of intense disappointment.

I was looking for the sunlight, Ashok thought. Darnae had once described to him how the heat of highsun in the city where she was born had scorched her skin and caused bright orange spots to burst in front of her eyes. But that was during the summer months, and Ashok knew they were too far north to feel that kind of heat at any point during their journey.

He returned his attention to the caravan and heard the twang of the first crossbow bolt just before it hit the side of a wagon. The second bolt caught Ashok in the shoulder and knocked him off the nightmare's back.

He fell on his shoulder, but the impact left him more surprised than hurt. When he got his breath, he found himself staring at a clump of grass and a strange, three-leafed weed growing from the earth. Ashok cursed himself. He let his attention wander for a breath, and the ambush caught him completely off guard.

Shouts went up among the caravan. Vlahna and the six shadar-kai riders broke away from the others and charged up the low hills. From his vantage, Ashok couldn't see how many attackers they pursued. He looked for Ilvani and saw



the top of her pale red head just above the wagon wall. At least she'd had the sense to take cover. He wished he could say as much. Sighing, Ashok rolled onto his back and yanked out the crossbow bolt.

Cree jumped off his horse and came to Ashok's side. "Are you all right?"

Ashok threw away the bolt in disgust. There was no blood on it. "I'm fine. It didn't even penetrate my armor."

"Aren't we going after them?" Skagi wheeled his horse around, kicking up dirt and grass. "Those other Blites can't have all the fun!"

"They won't catch them," Ashok said. "These were just insect stings. If it was a real ambush, they would have aimed for the horses first."

"He's right." Tuva weaved through the wagons, checking the beasts and arranging the drovers in a defensive formation. "There were only three of them. They were testing our reaction."

"Maybe the sellswords will make them think better of trying a real ambush," Cree said.

"Or more likely they'll simply return in greater numbers," Ashok said.

"You in one piece?" Tuva asked him.

Ashok nodded. As the leader walked away, Ashok put his hands against the ground to lever himself up. He stopped when he felt the grass beneath his palms. He pulled off his gloves.

Green blades, tinged with brown from the first frosts, were spongy and soft, very different from the sparse, brittle vegetation of the Shadowfell plains. He felt moisture beneath them, and a rich, earthy smell drifted up.

The air, too, held a great deal more moisture than the Shadowfell. It had rained on this spot, or maybe snowed, very recently. Ashok looked around at the hills and low-hanging clouds and became aware of other striking differences between his home and this new world.

Colors.

Some of the clouds were dark blue around the edges, and a variegated mist hung over the horizon. Rain in the distance—he smelled it in the air. It would reach the caravan before nightfall. The grass swayed and bent in the wind. The subtle movement had a hypnotic quality—as if the land itself were alive and aware of their presence. The rustle of the wind through the grass was different from the sound of its hissing over barren, eroded soil. A glance at the horizon revealed nothing to confuse the sky with the ground. They were different entities, but Ashok still felt disoriented. He couldn't quite find his balance—he didn't know where to rest his gaze. Everything moved, and so everything could be a waiting threat. Seen in that light, Ashok felt uneasy for the first time.

"You sure you didn't crack open your skull?" Skagi asked him.

"I'm fine," Ashok said.

The big man scratched his chin. "Good, then. You think you might get up to join us, or should we pick you up on the way back from Rashemen?"

Ashok blinked. He felt as though he'd just come out of a trance. Distantly, he heard Tuva order everyone back to his or her place. They were moving out again, and Ashok was still sitting in the grass. He stood up.

At last, he was in Faerûn.



Vlahna led them from the entry point to the banks of the Clearflow. The river, she said, was to be their constant companion until they joined the Golden Way. It rushed along over rocks and through stands of weeds. The shallows often had a skin of ice over them.

Up and down the line of wagons, Ashok saw breath fogs and people huddling under their cloaks. The more they traveled in this climate, the more they would grow

accustomed to it, but the sudden shock of the open cold stiffened everyone's movements. It would get worse the longer they were on the road that day.

Despite the frigid air and their initial stumble, the caravan moved along at a steady pace for two miles until the sound of hoofbeats from the east made Tuva call a halt. Ashok and the brothers rode up their flank to support a defense, but everyone relaxed when they saw it was the shadar-kai party returned from hunting the ambushers.

"What news, Kaibeth?" Tuva said.

A woman with short, yellowish hair and a tattoo of a spider clutching her shoulder spoke up. "We lost them in the hills. The terrain became too rough for the horses, but the bandits knew their path. Wherever they went had to be underground."

"There can't be many of them," said another of the sellswords. He had an ugly set of burn scars that covered his right cheek. "Unless they've tunneled under the whole countryside."

"It's probably an outpost. They'll wait for cover of dark and ride off to warn their larger force," Kaibeth said.

"Agreed," Tuva said. "Nothing to do now but wait for them. Back to your places, you six. The rest of you, this isn't a pleasure ride. We move forward."

The group broke up. Ashok saw Kaibeth watching him. She smirked when she rode by.

"Hope you didn't bruise your backside falling off that horse," she said. "I don't think I've ever seen an emissary of Tempus felled by a cheap crossbow bolt."

Ashok stared back at her and said nothing. He saw that she wore the symbol of Beshaba, goddess of misfortune, as a tattoo on her neck. The others in her group laughed as they returned to the front of the line. Ashok paid no attention. He should have known how it would be with the sellswords. To them, he was still Ikemmu's champion, higher in rank and favor.

Beshaba had been Vedoran's adopted goddess. He'd worshiped misfortune—or at least had given the appearance of worshiping it—until the day Ashok killed him.

Ashok had not witnessed Vedoran's funeral rites. He'd been too weak from his tenday in the dark to see how the city bade farewell to the warrior. Had Uwan spoken on Vedoran's behalf, coaxed his soul on to Beshaba's realm? Something inside Ashok told him the leader would have prayed for Vedoran—whereas Ashok had done his best not to think of the warrior since the day he died.

Beneath him, the nightmare whickered restlessly and broke Ashok from his thoughts. He looked around at the landscape and felt again that sense of movement, of things watching him from vast distances. It was a strange sensation, this rolling motion. The wind stirred the grass, the river threaded rocks and weeds, and now the caravan joined the constant motion.

Part of the threat he felt was the ambushers. Ashok saw it in Tuva and Vlahna as well, in the way they rode their horses out east and west of the caravan's path to scout. Every hour or so Cree or Skagi would venture out behind them, and more than once Ashok saw Kaibeth ride ahead to check the path.

As far as Ashok could tell, it was early morning when they'd come through the portal, but, as the day went on, the hills gave way to flat, open country. With fewer places for attackers to hide, the caravan crew relaxed a bit and eventually, Vlahna called a halt. The drovers hopped down from the wagons and waddled, stiff-backed, to check the horses. The other passengers immediately did the same. Ashok could see they were weary and grateful to be out of the jostling, bumping wagons.

"Before you get too comfortable," Vlahna called out to them, "let me remind all of you that it's not near dark yet, and that means we've many more miles to cover. This is a

catch-your-breath stop—nothing more. We move out when I give the word and not five breaths after that.”

Low-voiced grumbling threaded among the crew, but it was mostly good-natured. Ashok got down from the nightmare’s back and led him to the river. He watched his and the stallion’s reflection as he bent to drink. Again he had to marvel at the variety here, the water plants that grew out from the bank, the green algae, and even a few bright yellow flowers that had survived the first of the killing frosts. Life was going dormant all around him, but there were still small signs of how different that life was from what grew underground.

He pulled one of the flowers out of the ground by its roots. As he examined it, he heard soft laughter coming from nearby.

Some of the passengers and guards had wandered down by the river. Ashok was aware of them, but he hadn’t noticed one of the humans watching him. She wore leather armor and a helm underneath which he could see strands of dark curly hair.

The physical appearance of the other races always struck Ashok, especially that of the humans. They were so much like the shadar-kai in stature and build, but they had markedly varied skin colors that changed according to their emotions or environment. When she removed her helm, Ashok saw this one’s face was dark and creased from where the helm had rubbed her skin. Of course, her eyes affected him most of all.

Human eyes with their three—sometimes more—colors fascinated Ashok. Black at the center blended to blue, brown or maybe amber, then the whites with their spidery red tendrils branching off in delicate rivers.

He didn’t realize he’d been staring at the human woman in silence until she chuckled again.

“Why do you laugh?” he asked her, feeling a stab of irritation. He’d been laughed at enough today.

"I forgot what you looked like," she said. She surprised him by speaking the shadar-kai tongue—Common was the accepted language among the caravan crew—but Ashok thought she must not know what she was saying.

"I don't understand," he said.

She waved a hand. "Forgive me, that didn't make any sense, did it? I'm trying to say that you've never been to Faerûn before."

"How do you know that?"

"I see the signs." She plucked the flower out of his hand and tossed it in the river. They watched it float away. "You squint, you touch things as if they're breakable, and you walk around in a daze. I used to go on caravan runs with new shadar-kai all the time, but it's been so long since we've had one come through with us that it took me by surprise." She stepped forward and extended her hand. "I'm sorry—I don't mean to laugh. My name is Mareyn. I work for the Martuck family."

She spoke quickly, with a crisp accent Ashok had never heard in Ikemmu. He clasped her hand. "I'm Ashok. The Martucks are traders?"

"Some of them are." She glanced around. "The husband and wife are more than competent, but the boy would rather be anywhere else. I think his parents were hoping the caravan trip would put the fever in his blood, if you know what I mean."

When Ashok merely looked at her, she smiled uncertainly. "You're newer than new, aren't you?"

"Back to your posts—we're moving out!"

Vlahna's call came from upriver. Ashok stood and followed Mareyn and the others back up a short rise to the wagons.

"We'll talk again," Mareyn said when he turned to head for the back of the caravan.

Ashok started to ask her what they were going to manage to talk about when he could barely understand her, but she was already gone. She took up a position with a crossbow in

one of the wagons. Ashok saw the boy, the youngest Martuck, was there too. The two of them spoke for a breath, and though Ashok couldn't hear what they said, he had a good idea what they were talking about when the boy turned to stare at him.

Ashok stared back until the boy turned a little pale and looked away. Skittish, Ashok thought. He mounted the nightmare and rode back to where Skagi and Cree waited. They were arguing, as usual.

"It won't happen tonight," Cree said. "No human force can get themselves organized that fast."

Skagi nudged Ashok. "The one-eyed pup thinks we won't see an ambush tonight. Needs his sleep, I guess. What say you, Ashok? Will we see them tonight?"

The caravan was moving, joining the flow of life again. Ashok did his best to go along with it, but he was still tense. "I hope we don't see anything tonight," he said. "We're not ready."

"Speak for yourself," Skagi said sullenly.

Ashok sighed. "Fine, then. I'm not ready." Mareyn had been right. He was too new. "There's so much—I don't know where to look, where to put my hands."



The rain came two hours before nightfall. It started as intermittent drops, cold surprises splashing against their faces and necks. Ashok looked up at the sky. The dark blue clouds had turned black, and a crack of thunder sounded above their heads. A breath later, a torrent of icy needles came pouring from those clouds. The caravan was soon saturated.

Ashok pulled up the hood of his cloak to keep the rain out of his eyes, and the caravan crew hunkered down as best it could while still moving forward. The soft grass they traveled on would quickly turn to impassable mud. They would have

to make camp soon or waste time and energy pushing forward through the muck.

He wiped the rainwater from his face. In the back of the last wagon, Ilvani sat with her head bent, her chin almost touching her knees. She hadn't put her hood up, and the rain plastered her hair to her face.

"Ilvani!" He rode up to the wagon. The nightmare blew a hot, agitated breath, but otherwise it didn't react to her presence. "Are you all right?"

She raised her head and, as if she'd only just noticed the rain, tipped her face to the sky and let the sleet hit her cheeks. Ashok let her alone for a breath before he repeated his question.

"It's time to sleep now, isn't it?" Ilvani said. Weary resignation descended on her body, bending her forward again.

Before Ashok had a chance to say anything, the wagons slowed and halted. Tuva rode back to them and motioned to Ashok.

"We're stopping for the night," he said, pitching his voice loud enough to carry to the rest of the caravan. "The rain's too heavy—we can't get to the usual campsite used for this route, but there's some rocky ground up ahead that'll serve. We'll still be soaked, but we won't be sleeping in mud. More important, the wagons won't be stuck during the night. Guards, see Vlahna for your watch assignments. Passengers, make yourselves as comfortable as you can. The rest of you, get the gear and wagons secured. You know your jobs."

The rain was too heavy for fires, so the caravan cook handed out cold rations and the guards took the horses down to the river for fresh water. Vlahna assigned Ashok and the brothers the first watch. She pulled them aside.

"I want the three of you to hunt a little before dawn. Shadar-kai have the best eyes, and the more fresh meat we have the better. Just don't stray too far from the caravan. I



think we'll be looking at a surprise from those bandits come morning."

Cree elbowed Skagi. "Told you," he said.

The camp came together sloppily in the rain, but by the time it was full dark, everyone had eaten and was bedded down in the wagons, hastily erected tents, or on the ground with blankets thrown over their heads. The rain eventually dwindled to a fine, icy mist.

Ashok went to where Ilvani still sat in the back of the wagon. "You can bed down back here if you want, or you can have one of the tents," he told her.

"Stay in the wagon, witch," Skagi advised. He shook out his own soggy tent cloth. "You won't find a dry spot anywhere else."

"It won't matter," Ilvani said. "She'll find me wherever I go. I'll stay here." She huddled inside her cloak and lay down in the wagon.

"We'll encircle the camp," Ashok said. "I'll ride out a little ways with the ... my horse, and see if there's anything moving."

"Don't go looking for trouble without us," Cree said, giving Ashok a meaningful look.

"Not this time," Ashok said. He glanced again at the wagon where Ilvani slept.

"Don't worry," Cree said. "We'll all keep an eye on her."

Ashok mounted the nightmare and rode out from the camp. His vision adjusted easily to the moonlit darkness. Patchy silver light illuminated the open plain. He could see for miles across it, but there was no sign of their attackers. He circled the camp in an ever-widening arc, looking for tracks, but he found nothing.

They aren't ghosts, Ashok thought. They're here somewhere. It was possible they had magical means to communicate with their partners.

Once he got out far enough from the camp, Ashok gave the nightmare free rein. The beast took off, gaining speed

and power as he ran. Ashok sucked frigid air into his lungs. He could feel the contained heat of the nightmare beneath him.

“You’ll wait, won’t you,” Ashok murmured to the beast. “You’re biding your time because you don’t quite know your place here. But not for long. You’ll taste blood soon, but we have to be careful. You can’t betray what you really are.”

## CHAPTER NINE

A<sup>ASHOK</sup> SLEPT IN SHORT SNATCHES THAT NIGHT. H<sup>E</sup> KEPT hearing unfamiliar sounds, movement, and cries of animals he didn't recognize. Once he watched a bird soar down to trap a mouse in its talons. The creature was snow-white and had a flat face with dark-rimmed eyes. Ashok had never seen a bird like it before.

Skagi roused him before dawn, and the trio left the camp with the nightmare to hunt. They found deer tracks, a small herd moving north away from the camp. Skagi kneeled to examine the droppings.

"Pretty fresh," Skagi said. He wiped his hand on the grass. "We'll catch up to them if we run."

Standing next to him, Cree didn't reply. Skagi sighed and wiped his fingers on his brother's boot.

Ashok noted the warrior's stiff posture. He had his hands on his katars. "What is it?" Ashok said. "Did you hear something?"

Cree shook his head. "Look at the tracks," he said. "They're too widely spaced. Something scared them, made them run."

"A predator?" Ashok said.

"No sign of any in the area," Cree said. "And look here." He pointed to where the tracks came up from the river. "The tracks are evenly spaced. Something happened between here and there to make them run."

"They must have heard something," Skagi said. "Something the caravan missed."

"A sound they've heard before," Ashok said, understanding. "Something that signals violence to the animals in this area of the caravan route."

"We need to get back," Cree said, "now."

Ashok mounted the nightmare, and the brothers ran along beside him back toward the camp. Gray light spread from

the deep blue horizon. Riders came into view from the west—ten of them—moving fast. The camp had already seen them. The shadar-kai mounted up to go meet them while the rest stayed to defend the wagons.

Then, to the south, Ashok heard crossbow bolts singing in the air. Their owners—Ashok counted at least five of them—rode through the tall grass by the river. Ashok shouted a warning to Skagi and Cree and wrenched the nightmare around before they charged right into the path of the missiles. The black quarrels buried themselves in the wagon sides and into the dirt. Horse screams rang out as they hit two of the beasts.

No cheap weapons this time, Ashok thought grimly. They've brought out their best finery, just for us. He unhooked his chain from his belt and let it whip behind the running nightmare like a second barbed tail.

"We'll take the bowmen," Skagi yelled as he and Cree took cover behind the closest wagons. "Let your pony have the riders."

Ashok felt the blood sing in his veins as the nightmare surged ahead. The sellswords had a head start on him, but they were still outnumbered. Ashok picked his target so he'd have the fullest effect on the rest.

The shadar-kai and the brigands came together in a ringing clash of metal, horse screams, and sucking mud. Ashok saw Kaibeth bury her dagger in the neck of one of the beasts. The animal gave a piercing scream and went down, pinning its rider underneath it. She turned and slid off her own horse to attack the leg of another that was fighting her comrade, the burn-scarred man. More than once the clustered horses came close to trampling her, but each time she danced aside and finally teleported out of the melee.

Ashok hauled the nightmare's reins to the left, sending them out wide of the death circle and flashing blades. A crossbow quarrel skipped off his bone scale breastplate and flew wide. Ashok spared a glance at the camp and saw a

second group of five crossbowmen riding in to support the first. Between them, they'd effectively pinned down the caravan for at least the next few minutes. Confident, perhaps, that they had the caravan surrounded, one of the crossbowmen had pulled off and was firing at Ashok.

Well enough, Ashok thought. You want to flank me, let's see how you like firing through your own men.

He switched the spiked chain to his left hand and slid off the side of the nightmare, putting its thick body between him and the crossbow quarrels. He slung his right arm over the beast's neck to keep from falling.

"What do you think?" he shouted to the nightmare. "Can you outrun their stings?"

In response, the nightmare let out its own fierce scream. Though dampened by Neimal's magic, the cry echoed across the plain for miles and made the combatants falter in their attacks. Several of the brigands turned to see where the sound had come from.

All they see, Ashok thought, is a charging horse. But as the nightmare's scream died away, perhaps they heard the sound of Ashok's wild laughter.

A second crossbow bolt whistled overhead. In its wake, Ashok hauled himself back up straight on the nightmare and brought the chain over his head. He switched hands again and wrapped the spikes around the neck of a brigand on the outer edge of the circle. The brigand choked, his hands reaching automatically for the spikes. His hands came away bloody. Ashok rode right by the man and kept going. The chain pulled taut and jerked the brigand off his horse.

Ashok let go of his end and braced himself with both hands as the nightmare slammed into a second horse's body. The animal's legs folded, and it, too, dumped its rider. Ashok tensed, expecting Neimal's illusion to fail, but the spell stayed in place, linked to the bone spur necklace.

A sword tip flashed in the pale dawn light and cut a slash in his armor. Burning pain erupted in his flank, and Ashok

could spare no more thoughts for the nightmare. He slapped the beast's flank and teleported just as the nightmare bolted.



Skagi yanked a crossbow bolt out of his arm and experienced a momentary dizziness when he realized the quarrel had multiple barbs that had torn through his flesh all at once. He drew in a slow breath and shook himself. The pain spread outward in silky waves. Falchion in hand, he stood up and screamed, waving the weapon in his hands.

“Come over here, dogs, and let me take a bite out of you!”

No one took the bait, but Skagi dodged the two bolts that hurtled at his face. He ran forward and dived for cover next to one of the wagon wheels. Cree was in the back with Vlahna, who had her shortbow going as fast as she could get arrows nocked. The rest of the caravan guards either returned fire or, like Skagi, made their way from cover to cover until they could get in sword range of the bowmen.

A lot of them died in the process.

“They’re not quite the bad shots we thought they were,” Cree called down to Skagi.

“Who ever said that?” Skagi shot back.

“Oh, I don’t know—the corpse over there maybe, or that one, or ...”

“He’s right,” Vlahna said. She yelled out, “Don’t waste yourselves by charging one at a time. You’ll only swallow a bolt. Oh, godsdamn it!” Her bowstring snapped. “Never mind, just give me some cover, Cree. Tymora!”

Vaulting over the side of the wagon, Vlahna charged. She screamed to her goddess and batted aside crossbow quarrels as she went.

“Cover her?” Cree sputtered. “With what?”

“Your body, Brother.” Skagi stood up and ran to follow Vlahna. “Or you can hide behind us and—”

Cree jumped down from the wagon and ran alongside Skagi. Either the brigands were running low on ammunition or they never expected an outright assault, because suddenly Skagi was out of the black rain and staring down at a brigand frantically trying to reload his weapon. He didn't become aware of Skagi until the man was on top of him.

Skagi kicked aside the crossbow and followed up with his falchion. He slashed the man's armor, which was not quite as fine as his weaponry. The leather parted easily for Skagi's blade, forged in Ikemmu's fires by the greatest smiths in Faerûn, as far as the big man was concerned. But Skagi was not sentimental about his killing. He put his blade into the brigand's chest and moved on to help his brother and Vlahna.

He caught Cree just as his brother slashed a brigand's throat with his katar. As if they sensed the tide had turned, the crossbowmen rapidly dropped their weapons and came into the fray among the wagons where they could engage the human guards in smaller groups. Skagi heard Vlahna shouting to some of them to break off and help the shadar-kai riders down by the river.

Skagi glanced that way, but he couldn't pick out Ashok among the flashes of steel and the shadar-kai teleporting about for better positions. Anyway, Ashok would be fine on his own, Skagi thought, unless he did something deliberately reckless and tried to get himself killed. Which was also a distinct possibility, given that Skagi would probably do the same thing in his place. Still, he could at least wait and share some of the fun.

"We need to check on Ilvani," Cree said from just behind him. "She was sleeping in the wagon."

"Better hope she stayed there and took cover." Skagi met a charging brigand and absorbed the impact of an axe against his falchion. His teeth rattled, but he held on and

thrust the man back a pace. He spared a glance at Cree and felt a tremor go through his body.

"Behind you!" he shouted.

Cree turned just in time to see a brigand come up on his blind side with a club. He ducked—thank Tempus he was still faster than all of them, Skagi thought—and slashed at the man from the groin up. Skagi winced as the blow landed.

"My thanks," Cree said gravely after the man had fallen.

Skagi nodded. They fought on, but Skagi noticed a tremor in his hands. He dismissed the shakes as battle frenzy and gripped his blade harder. Still, he found himself staying close to Cree and watching his brother's back, a thing he'd rarely had to do in the past. It was always the other way around.



Ilvani awoke to the sound of crossbow fire and heavy breathing. A weight slammed into the side of her wagon, which caused her to hit her head on the floorboards. She was grateful for this, in a way, because it assured her she wasn't dreaming.

In fact, she'd not dreamed at all last night.

Ilvani was still pondering this when the weight that had slammed into her wagon threw itself over the side and landed among the crates and barrels near the front. He was human and small—bony arms and legs stuck out at all angles. When he turned his face toward her, Ilvani saw the innocence of youth and the terror of the battle reflected back at her. She noticed all these things before she realized the boy was speaking to her, his lips moving frantically. He wanted help.

Why did they all ask for her help?

With an effort, Ilvani pulled herself to wakefulness and back into the world. She looked the boy over. He didn't appear to be hurt, only covered in mud. Grass stuck out of his hair as if he'd been crawling along the ground.



"What happened?" she asked.

"Brigands," the boy said. "Mareyn, she tossed me in the wagon like a sack of dung. She left me ... Please ..."

"I'm *right here*, dolt," said a voice, followed by a body that sprang lightly into the wagon. A dark-skinned woman landed unceremoniously on top of the boy, who moaned in pain. "Coddled baby, that's what you are. I should have left you in the muck." She sounded amused, not angry. Then she saw Ilvani, and her face brightened. "Well met. I'm Mareyn, and this is Lord Grump-and-Stomp."

"Kelios Lestran Martuck," the boy said weakly. He pushed Mareyn off him.

"Call him Les." Mareyn winked at Ilvani. All the while she spoke she was cranking a crossbow. When she finished loading it, she popped her head up and fired at a target Ilvani couldn't see. She dropped back undercover. "What's your name?" she asked.

Ilvani said nothing. She was still trying to reconcile whether any of this was real. She knew she wasn't dreaming, but that didn't necessarily mean she wasn't imagining the scene before her.

"Don't bother," Les said sourly. "She doesn't speak. I think she must be a dumb creature."

Mareyn scowled at the boy, but Ilvani didn't care. People had tried to give her so many names. She remembered only some of them: deaf, dumb, insane, prophet, witch, sister. Her heart stumbled over the last one.

She wanted out of this wagon. Her joints were stiff and sore, and she knew Ashok and the others would be in the fighting. She would help them if she could. Her mind felt unusually clear after her long sleep. With clarity, the magic slumbering within her awoke.

A brigand appeared at the back of the wagon, his sword up and seeking flesh. Mareyn came forward and blocked the blow with her crossbow. Les leaned forward, pulled her sword out of its scabbard, and hastily shoved it into her hands.

Mareyn dropped the crossbow and smiled her thanks. Ilvani scooted back out of her way and risked a glance over the tall side of the wagon.

The camp was a mess of blood, bodies, and scattered gear. Not many of the caravan people were dead, but there were plenty of wounded, and only a handful of the brigands had broken off in retreat. Ilvani didn't see Ashok among the melee, but she thought she heard Skagi's voice among the battle sounds. He came around the side of a wagon, Cree trailing behind him, and saw her.

"Put your head down, witch," Skagi cried in exasperation. "Do you want it made into a trophy?"

The wagon shook with the ferocity of Mareyn's sword swings. Ilvani gripped the side of the wagon with one hand and raised the other above her head. Necrotic energy blackened her fingers. Mareyn ducked the brigand's sword slash, leaving Ilvani an open path. The witch released the blackfire. The dark energy hit the brigand in the face and blasted him off the back of the wagon. Two other brigands fighting nearby saw the blackfire and ran.

"Tymora's kiss!" Mareyn saluted Ilvani with her sword. "This has been a fine day so far!" The Martuck boy whimpered and put his head behind a barrel.

"Oh, that's not fair!" Skagi cried. He pushed through the group of human guards who pursued the brigands. "She does one spell, and everyone's in awe and fleeing in fear. You always steal the glory, witch."

Cree laughed. "Come on, Brother. Run with me, and maybe we'll catch a few alive. Tuva and Vlahna will be pleased if we get a pair to interrogate."

The sound of hoofbeats made them all turn. Bright-eyed and bloodied, Ashok rode over to them on his horse. Ilvani saw the way the nightmare stiffened when he got near her, the way his eyes darkened with malice.

He smells it on me, Ilvani thought. The dead woman's scent, the storm. The spirits reach through me and stroke

everything with a corrupt touch. Why couldn't they have come sooner, when she'd needed their foul influence?

"The riders that kept on their horses are fleeing," Ashok said. "Is everyone all right here?" His gaze found each of them but rested last and longest on Ilvani. "I saw your spell," he said.

"We all did," Skagi grumbled.

"It's been a good day." Ilvani found herself tentatively echoing Mareyn's words.

"That's not all—oh, come on, you heard what they said. The brigands are fleeing." Mareyn dragged Les out of the wagon and got him on his feet. She smiled warmly at Ilvani. "This one shared the kiss with me."

Skagi raised an eyebrow, but Ilvani just looked at her. The nightmare blew a short breath that to Ilvani smelled like smoke. She wondered if any of the humans could sense the wrongness of the stallion.

Mareyn laughed. "Not an actual kiss—I meant Tymora's favor. It's no coincidence that we toppled into your wagon. Tymora meant for us to bring good fortune to each other, and it started just now when we fought the brigands. I believe the Lady is always looking for such pairings, opportunities to throw folk into one another's path and see what happens. What folk choose to do with these 'chance' meetings is up to them, but I believe they come out the better for it." She held out a hand to Ilvani. "What do you say? Are we bound together in luck, for as long as we walk the same road?"

Ilvani looked at the woman's outstretched hand. If she touched it, the spirits might crawl out of her skin and infect Mareyn, or the woman's hand might become a snake. She could never trust what might happen when flesh touched flesh.

"Don't tie your fortune to mine," Ilvani said quietly. "You'll regret it, if you do."

She turned and got down out of the wagon while Mareyn's hand still hung in the air between them. She didn't wait to see the disappointment, the confusion seep into the woman's eyes. There was nothing Ilvani could do about that. Too many eyes watched her, too many hands tried to touch her. Even Ashok. Especially Ashok. She could feel his gaze follow her all the way down to the river.



Ashok watched Ilvani walk away from the group. She kneeled by the water's edge and drank. When she'd finished, she stayed where she was, her back to them.

The brigands were gone—Skagi and Cree had gone with Vlahna to try to round up stragglers, but Ashok had a feeling they wouldn't catch any alive. This group had been well organized and prepared to accept heavy losses in order to get the caravan's cargo. Still, they'd managed to fend them off with minimal loss of life.

Mareyn introduced the boy, Les, to him before the young one went running off to find his parents. Now the pair of them stood alone together. Ashok tried to wipe some of the dry encrusted blood off his body, but he knew he'd have to bathe in the river to remove most of it. Mareyn went to one of the fallen caravan guards and checked for signs of life. She shook her head and murmured a prayer to Tymora.

"Was he a companion of yours?" Ashok asked.

She shook her head. "He was one of Tatigan's guards." She looked around at the chaotic scene. "I'm surprised Daruk didn't show up for this battle. We could have used him."

"The bard?" Ashok said. He tried to picture someone like Darnae playing a lute in the middle of the bloody scene. The picture didn't fit in his mind.

"Your witch is a strange one," Mareyn continued, dismissing the subject of Daruk as quickly as she'd brought it up. "I've never met anyone who refused the kiss like that."

"You shouldn't be offended," Ashok said. He rolled over the dead body of a brigand and searched for pouches or symbols, something to suggest where he might have come from. Of course, he found nothing. "Ilvani's not easily drawn out of her own mind."

"Oh, I wasn't offended," Mareyn said, "and I won't stop trying—to draw her out, I mean. I still think there's a purpose to our meeting. She's different—I can tell. Even among shadar-kai, she's been hurt more than most, hasn't she?"

"More than anyone knows," Ashok said.

"Then she needs Tymora's aid more than I thought," Mareyn said. She checked another dead brigand but came up with nothing.

"She already has the favor of Tempus," Ashok said, "whatever that's worth."

"It's a tricky thing, the gods' favor," Mareyn agreed. She wiped her blade on the grass before sheathing it. "They often know our needs better than we do, though we don't always realize it."

"If that's true, Tempus owes Ilvani more than He can ever make up for," Ashok said. "Her needs have gone unheeded far too long."

"I'm sorry to hear that—" Mareyn stopped and picked up what looked like a hand whistle from the ground next to one of the brigands. "What have we here? A lucky find?" She grinned at Ashok.

Ashok took the whistle and put it to his lips. He blew a shallow breath and got a high-pitched warbling sound from the whistle. "A fake bird call," he said. "That's how they signaled the attack."

"Who signaled?" Mareyn said. "We scouted the surrounding area all night. Nobody got close enough to see the camp."

"And yet, as soon as Skagi, Cree, and I left the camp to hunt—reducing the caravan's numbers—the call went out,"

Ashok said. "That's what scared the deer. They've heard it before and know it means violence."

Mareyn cursed. "So we've got a traitor tagging along with us on this trip."

"Show this to Tuva," Ashok told her, "but no one else. If the traitor's not dead or escaped with the brigands, he's still here. We have a better chance of catching him if he doesn't know he's been found out."

"A good plan, but what if the traitor is you or me?" Mareyn said, cocking an eyebrow.

"Then Tymora's luck isn't working very well for one of us," Ashok said. "We'll find the traitor—it's only a matter of time."



Once they'd tended the wounded, buried the dead, and got the caravan back in order and ready to move on, they'd lost half the morning. Dim sunlight penetrated the restless clouds, and the ground was still wet, but Tuva and Vlahna pushed them at a merciless pace to make up for all the lost time. The normally serene Tatigan wore a black look and snapped at anyone who tried to speak to him.

Tuva must have told him about the traitor. It did nothing for Tatigan's pride in his new trading venture to have it undermined from within after only a day on the road.

Strangely, however, most of Tatigan's anger seemed directed at the bard, Daruk, who rode in the same wagon with the merchant. They argued in low voices for more than an hour, until finally Tatigan's temper erupted for the entire caravan to hear.

"You're not a minstrel singing for his keep at the village inn," Tatigan cried.

"You're right," Daruk said, his smooth voice rising to match Tatigan's ire. "I'm much more than that. I don't rise to meet the challenge of dirt road brigands. It's beneath me."

“Beneath you!” Tatigan’s face reddened. “You think you’re putting on a show for—”

“Aren’t I?” Daruk said. “This is my work. I perform on a stage—it might be blood-soaked, but it’s my arena. I decide when I go on and off again. That was our agreement.”

“Gods save me from your tragic romanticism,” Tatigan said irritably. He lowered his voice, but Ashok still heard. “We lost four good men and women today, and many more were hurt.”

“Chances are, I couldn’t have prevented any of those deaths,” Daruk said. He put a hand around Tatigan’s shoulder. The merchant shrugged it off. “You know me, green-eyed man. If you want to appeal to my sentiments, get me a battle worthy of a song. Give me warriors who will dazzle the gods with the fury of their souls. Do that, and I will reach into the darkness and show you what glory means.”

“You expect to find all that on a coster caravan run in the middle of the plains during winter?” Tatigan said dryly. “You’re a fool, Daruk.”

“I certainly haven’t found it here among these shadar-kai,” Daruk said. The way he said “these shadar-kai” made Ashok think the bard wasn’t deriding the entire race, only those associated with the caravan—or maybe with Ikemmu. He couldn’t be sure.

“Many of them are Tempus’s children,” Tatigan said. He’d calmed somewhat, probably because they were now discussing one of the merchant’s favorite topics. “They fight for the glory of the war god—that should appeal to your sensibilities.”

“Hardly.” This time Daruk *was* being derisive. “Tempus wastes them, so do Beshaba and the rest, as far as I’m concerned. They’ve not even begun to grasp their full potential. But that one”—he turned around and looked straight at Ashok—“has an inkling of what’s inside him. Eh, chainfighter? Do I speak the truth?”

Ashok stared back at the bard. There was no use pretending he hadn't overheard the conversation. "When I've heard you sing," Ashok said, "I'll decide if it's a song worth hearing."

Tatigan chuckled. "Well said, as always, Ashok. I knew the two of you would make interesting companions." He seemed in much better spirits. "When we reach the trade route, we'll have an evening of song as celebration. Then you can judge for yourself whether this one is all wind and poetry."



## CHAPTER TEN

YOU'RE DIFFERENT. CAN YOU FEEL IT?"

Sitting beside the lake, Ilvani watched small fish dart back and forth in the shallows, chasing food. The sun blazed down from overhead; she felt warm and drowsy, and a gentle breeze moved her hair. Beside her on a large, flat rock sat the Rashemi witch. They sat close together, not quite touching, and watched the sun-dazzled water.

"I didn't say you could share this rock," Ilvani said.

"I saw you sitting here all alone, and I wanted to be with you."

"That's a lie," Ilvani said, but she wasn't angry. "You still want me to help you."

"Yes. You like sitting here, don't you? Where it's peaceful?"

"You don't really understand us." Ilvani smiled faintly. She found herself thinking, abstractly, this is a lethal moment for a shadar-kai. When the sun goes down, when we're alone in the dark, this peaceful moment grows fangs. The shadows come out to snatch the soul away. But this little snow rabbit doesn't know that. Ilvani supposed she could forgive her ignorance.

It *was* beautiful here. She watched the empty boats drift across the lake in a serene procession: one, two, three, and four of them in a line. Symbols carved into their wooden hulls glimmered with silver-blue light. They were the same symbols she'd carved into her arms. She should be afraid of them, but she wasn't. They were too far away to hurt her. The sky was cloudless, dense blue. No storm would come today.

"Where are they all going?" Ilvani asked, pointing to the boats. "If they're empty, how do they know when they've arrived?"

“None of them are empty,” the snow rabbit said. “Look closer.”

Ilvani stared at the lead boat. The sun blurred her vision, and in the sudden, wavering brightness, she glimpsed the outline of a wolf. Peaked ears and a tapered snout—the telthor was at least six feet long, with thick shoulders and a luxurious tail that swished back and forth.

“He won’t bite you,” the snow rabbit said. “He has other enemies to worry about.”

“Why did you say I was different?” Ilvani asked.

The witch smiled. “It’s not something that’s easily explained. You either feel it or you don’t.”

Ilvani considered this. What had changed about her since she’d begun the caravan journey? “The storm passed,” she said.

The witch’s expression turned sad. “No. It’s still here, waiting. But it’s content to wait, for now, so we’re safe.”

Ilvani stood up. She moved restlessly, wanting to comprehend this new awareness of herself that the witch seemed to possess. Her hand touched the green bag tied at her waist. She gripped the drawstrings tightly.

The Rashemi woman saw the movement and smiled in approval. “You feel it, don’t you? Don’t be afraid.”

Ilvani wasn’t afraid. She fingered the drawstrings and considered the implications of what she felt. She’d been days on the road and never once had she opened the bag to draw out her memories. Nor had she added new ones to the boxes. Panic gripped her as she considered the potential loss, but no, there they were. She found she could look back and remember the events of the past days with near-perfect clarity. When was the last time she’d gone away to that sanctuary in her mind? When was the last gap in her memories?

“It won’t last,” Ilvani said, more to herself than to the snow rabbit. “The shadows will start to talk again, and it will all

get jumbled together.” She looked out across the lake. “The wolf will turn on me.”

“Not if you tame the wolf,” the witch said. “You can silence the voices. I have to believe it’s possible. Not everyone fails ...” Her voice faltered.

Ilvani held herself, her arms pressed to her stomach against a sudden wave of sickness. This is when the storm comes, she thought. It’s going to swallow us again.

But nothing happened. The day remained peaceful and sunny. Water insects skipped across the surface of the lake. The fish chased after them eagerly.

“Do you remember your childhood?” the snow rabbit asked her. Her voice was steady again, though she seemed sadder than before.

“Sometimes,” Ilvani said. She hadn’t kept boxes, back then. The memories were vague and half-formed, except the ones that blazed brightly, like images of Natan.

“The spirits used to come to me when I was a child. I’d see whole worlds that no one else could see,” the Rashemi witch said. “The snow rabbit took me to the Feywild. I slept with my head against his fur, beneath trees with leaves that looked like bluebells. I felt safe. Did you ever feel safe like that, Ilvani?”

Ilvani tried to remember if she’d ever felt truly safe. Only in that place where no memories were made. But if she couldn’t remember what safe was, how could she claim the emotion?

“Natan,” she said finally. “I felt ... better ... with Natan, my brother. But he’s gone now.”

The witch sighed. “I wish it weren’t so. It’s going to make things that much more difficult for you. Isn’t there anyone else?”

“No.”

The snow rabbit gave Ilvani a strange look, then, as if she knew she was lying.

“Oh, look.” The witch pointed to the lake. It had frozen over. “Winter’s here.”



Ilvani opened her eyes and saw the clouds moving above her head in a heavy gray mass. The wagon dipped and jostled beneath her, yet she’d still managed to fall asleep in the middle of the afternoon. She hadn’t fallen asleep so carelessly since she’d been in Darnae’s shop.

The nightmares stayed away. The snow rabbit had become a tame creature.

Moisture falling on her face had wakened her. She looked around, expecting the falling rain to blind her.

Snow covered her black cloak.

She raised both hands to catch the white flakes and watched them melt away into tiny puddles in her palms. The wagon rolled to a stop to give the horses a brief rest. They’d been traveling steadily for several days now, with no weather delays or brigand attacks.

Ilvani stood up and looked over the side of the wagon into a cold white vastness. Snow blanketed the ground, and the horses shook white flakes from their manes. The wind had died. Silence and stillness reigned across the plain. In the distance, she beheld a vertical stone marker and a beaten down, muddied path that wound to the east.

It was the trade route, the Golden Way.

A murmur of excitement threaded through the caravan as the crew saw the marker. They’d finally reached the trade route, and they would have a measure of civilization and security, at least until they started the climb into the Sunrise Mountains.

Climbing down from the wagon, Ilvani shook the snow from her hair and pulled up the hood of her cloak. She’d thought they were just going to rest here, but she noticed that the caravan was already setting up a camp. The cook grumbled about trying to light a fire in the snow, and the

passengers stood in groups, shivering and stomping their feet.

There was a small pinewood just off the trade route to the west. Trees grew alongside the road in sparse patches, their snow-crusted needles bowing close to the ground. She remembered Tatigan, the merchant, describing the trees to Ashok and naming them. Mixed in with these were a few bare deciduous trees, but they were small and stunted.

She walked over to where Ashok, Skagi, and Cree were tethering their horses to these trees. "Why are we making camp here?" she asked.

Skagi looked at her with some surprise, as if he hadn't expected her to ask such a direct question. Had she never done that before? Or had they never understood her questions? She scowled at not knowing the answer to this riddle of herself.

Ashok answered her. "Tuva thinks the wind's going to pick up in the next day or two and make us snow blind. Tatigan wants to make a quick expedition into Uzbek and back before nightfall to avoid the weather, so we're stopping here while he and a few others take goods into the village."

"Are you going with them?" Ilvani asked, looking at the three of them.

This time even Ashok looked a little perplexed. "No. Vlahna wants us here to hunt in the woods and guard the caravan."

"Too bad Tatigan won't take the Beshabans into Uzbek with him," Cree said. "Your friend Mareyn's going, though," he told Ilvani.

"Would you like to come into the woods with us?" Ashok said. "We're going on foot. It won't be far."

Ilvani looked toward the dense pines. She nodded. "I'll come."

When they'd secured the camp and placed watch guards about the perimeter, the four of them set off for the woods. Their boots crunched in the snow and brittle brown needles

scattered about the ground. Ilvani bent and picked up a large cylindrical cone that had fallen from one of the trees. She ran her fingers along its scales and listened to the sound her nails made on the woody ridges. The stillness magnified every footstep and breath. When snow slid off a bowed branch and fell to the ground, they heard the impact.

Cree kneeled to examine a set of closely spaced tracks. "Rabbit," he said, indicating the two-inch-long depressions in the snow.

"Have to catch a lot of those to make a decent meal for everyone," Skagi said.

"If we could find another deer herd, we'd have enough fresh meat for days," Ashok said.

Curious, Ilvani followed the rabbit tracks. They cut a twisting path through the trees, unhurried, as if the small creature had been foraging.

"Don't stray too far, Ilvani," Ashok called to her.

Ilvani raised a hand to show she'd heard him, but she didn't take her eyes off the tracks. They led deeper into the woods, where the trees grew tall enough to block much of the dim sunlight penetrating the cloud cover. At last they stopped near a small hole at the base of a tree. Ilvani paused to listen for the sound of the rabbit. She kneeled and pressed her ear to the earth, but she heard only the silence. The snow rabbit slept, just as the earth slept.

Above her, she heard the sudden rush of flapping wings. Ilvani lifted her head and saw a bird's wing. Though she couldn't see it clearly, she had an impression of light brown plumage and darker spots on the animal's body. It landed in the tree above the rabbit's den. Ilvani lay on her back on the pine needles so that she could see the bird clearly.

It was an owl—a brown-plumed owl with eyes like garnets. The bird turned on its perch and surveyed the area. When it saw the shadar-kai woman sprawled across its hunting ground, the bird cocked its head, questioning, Ilvani

thought. What was this thing, this spot in the snow? How did it come to be here? How long will it stay?

Ilvani closed her eyes. She didn't know the answer to any of those questions. Then she heard again the swish of wings, and when she opened her eyes, there were two more owls perched beside the first. She stared up at the sky and saw the shadows of more birds circling. They glided down in a slow spiral and landed in the pine tree, five, six, ten owls all looking down at her. She'd never seen such beautiful feathers.

"Ilvani?"

The sound of Ashok's voice broke the stillness and made the birds tense. Ilvani expected them to fly away, but they stayed on their branches, silent watchers in the snow.

Ashok's face came into view above her, blocking out the birds and the pale sun. His long gray hair hung about his face in tangles, and his black eyes watched her with the same questions swimming in them as in the owls'.

"I don't know the answers," she said.

He sat down next to her. "Aren't you cold, lying on the ground?"

She thought about it and discovered she was actually very cold. Until he said it, she hadn't noticed.

He took his cloak off and held it out to her. The gesture, so vivid an echo of another time he'd done this, made Ilvani's breath catch in her throat. Hearing her soft gasp, Ashok stiffened. He realized it, too, but it was too late now to take it back. Cautiously, Ilvani reached out and took the cloak. She spread it over herself. Her body warmed immediately from the latent heat of his, but now she felt a different kind of cold, a remoteness that made her want to retreat into her mind.

The owls made her stay. Their beautiful feathers and calm eyes—there was no threat here. If there were, the owls would cry out in warning and fly away. She was safe here, as safe as any person could be.

She looked at Ashok. He sat quietly waiting, expecting nothing from her. He was the only one who did that, now that Natan was gone. She wondered, if she said nothing, just lay there in the snow, would he stay beside her until the snow covered them both?

"It's not a good idea. We'd have to dig ourselves out eventually," she said, resigned.

He smiled faintly. "You were making much more sense earlier," he said. "I knew it couldn't last."

"My fault. It's because I say only half of what I think and half of what I see," Ilvani said. "You can't see the owls, can you?"

He tilted his head. "Did you see some in the trees?" He looked around at the wood. "I'd like to see what one looks like outside the Shadowfell."

Ilvani glanced up. There were thirteen owls now. "So would I," she said.

"Do you want to go back to the camp?" Ashok asked.

She shook her head. "I'm fine. I'm not afraid to dream," she said.

That got his attention. "The woman from your dreams—she's gone?"

"Not gone. But she's different. She's not being hunted. She's at peace, so I can be at peace."

"The nightmare hasn't reacted to you the way he did on the Shadowfell plain," Ashok said. He made a gesture toward her as if to lift the cloak, but he stopped himself and let his hand rest on the spiked chain hanging from his belt. "Your arms are healing?" he asked.

"Yes," Ilvani said. "But there will be scars, and I won't know what they mean."

"The symbols," Ashok said. "Don't worry, when we get to Rashemen, the witches will explain why you were seeing them in your dreams. Or maybe ..."

"What?"



“Couldn’t you ask ... Him? Surely Tempus could give you some hint as to what the dreams mean?”

Ilvani sighed. “He might, but I haven’t talked to Him since that night—you know when.”

“I know.”

She scowled. “I’m not afraid. But I haven’t decided what I think or feel about Him.”

“Neither have I,” Ashok said.

They sat in silence after that. Ilvani heard Skagi and Cree moving through the trees. There was the sound of a blade, a heavy thud—in that instant she felt the pulse of life quicken and fade. The owls rustled their wings and made soft keening sounds that caused Ilvani’s heart to quiver in her chest.

The soul’s flight—tonight there will be another long journey, Ilvani thought. Another creature will have to find its way home.

“Cree killed a deer,” she said.

Ashok nodded. He didn’t ask her how she knew. “Cree is doing well without his eye,” he said.

Ilvani sat up and shook the snow out of her hair. “Your words don’t match your face,” she said.

He fingered the spiked chain, heedless of the sharp edges waiting to bite his skin. Ilvani sensed new magic crawling along the links, magic that smelled like smoke. “You told me once that I should value my companions and keep them safe,” he said. “I failed in that.”

“You didn’t understand what I was asking you,” Ilvani said.

“That’s not truly surprising.”

“You’re not ready to understand.”

The snow had stopped falling. Skagi and Cree came trotting through the trees, carrying a deer carcass between them.

“Not to worry, you two,” Skagi said dryly. “You just keep on sitting there. We can handle this hunt. It was no effort at all, really.”

Ashok grinned. "Skagi and his great enemy, the woodland doe."

"He needs the training," Cree said.

Skagi dropped his end of the deer, which caused Cree to stumble and curse. "Can we go back now? If those brigands return, I don't want to miss any of the fun. We haven't had a good fight in days."

"We're all feeling it," Cree said. He flexed his gloved fingers. Ilvani knew he was holding back a tremor. When he could no longer control it, he would need satisfaction, in one form or another. Their shadow selves had been too long at peace on the road. She could see them, the shadows clawing restlessly at their skin. She saw the thing they feared, she heard the whisper they tried to ignore. But she could never put a name to the things she saw, or tell Cree, Skagi, or Ashok that the menace was so close all the time. It would make them afraid of her.

She was not always aware of her world or the workings of the people in it, but Ilvani knew enough to know that she would rather the shadar-kai thought she was crazy than fear her.

"We'll spar tonight," Ashok said, "the three of us. Maybe we can talk the Beshabans into joining us. They have to be hurting too."

"So long as they know 'spar' means you stop short of 'kill,' " Cree said, but there was a spark in his black eye, a hint of excitement at the possibility of challenging the other shadar-kai.

Ashok knows what to say to them, Ilvani thought. Maybe he is beginning to understand. She looked up at the tree, but the owls were gone. They had fled the shadows too.



When they got back to camp—the brothers had made Ashok carry the deer—he deposited the meat with the cook, who'd managed to get several fires going, some for cooking

and some for warmth. The presence of the invigorating flames and their arrival at the trade route more or less on schedule had put the camp into an almost-festive mood. Tatigan, the Martucks, and the dwarf merchant—Tatigan had referred to him only as Thorm—sat around one of the fires and discussed their expedition into Uzbeg. Ashok couldn't hear what they said, but by their expressions, the trip must have gone well. Even the boy, sitting close to his parents, seemed at ease.

Ashok saw the bard, Daruk, sitting on a rock before the largest fire. He had his eyes closed in meditation. Ashok wondered if tonight was the night they would finally get to hear the man sing.

Eveningfeast was spitted venison and more trail rations. Ashok took the bowl the cook handed to him and went to sit with Ilvani and the brothers by one of the fires. A few minutes later, Mareyn came over with her own meal and sat down on Ilvani's other side. She said nothing to the witch, just went about eating. Ashok couldn't tell if the woman's presence unsettled Ilvani or not. She'd been unusually coherent in the woods earlier that day. In fact, looking at her now across the fire, Ashok sensed a flicker of vitality in her thin face. Maybe it was just false hope on his part, but Ashok thought that removing Ilvani from the oppressive Shadowfell had brought her some peace.

He wished he could understand her better—see some of the things she saw. He knew too well what it was like to feel isolated and helpless, with shadows all around.

Ilvani turned and said something to Mareyn then that Ashok couldn't hear. Mareyn gave a delighted laugh and nodded her head. Ashok wanted to move closer so he could hear their conversation, but he noticed the bard, Daruk, coming toward them.

"Well met," the man said.

His wide smile showed excitement but too many teeth. The expression didn't look friendly. Ashok and the brothers

nodded a greeting. Ilvani and Mareyn were still talking and did not notice the bard.

"I feel I've been unspeakably rude for not introducing myself before now, especially since Tatigan has told me so much about all of you," the bard continued, though his gaze rested on Ashok as he spoke. "I am Daruk the singer, Daruk the rhymer, Daruk the traveler."

"Lot of names for one human," Skagi said. He licked meat juice off his fingers. "You get along better having more names than anyone else?"

"It certainly never hurts to have advantages no one else can claim," Daruk said. "I also call myself Daruk the collector, but only at certain times. I've collected tales on many fascinating subjects, Skagi—almost scion of Tareff the Mad, weren't you? That would have been *quite* a name, had you been able to claim it."

Ashok saw Skagi's gray face go rigid in a heartbeat. By the time Ashok registered a similar reaction in Cree, Skagi was on his feet, bowl thrown aside so he could get his hands on his falchion hilt.

Ashok and Cree sprang up to restrain the big warrior. Skagi said nothing, but the tension in the warrior's muscles told the extent of his rage. Ashok strained to keep Skagi's weapon in its sheath.

"Whatever it is, he isn't worth it," Ashok hissed.

"Listen to Ashok," Cree said, speaking low and rapidly. "This is old blood, already spilled and turned to dust. It means nothing, Brother. *Nothing.*"

Cree caught the side of his brother's head and forced him to look at his face. Skagi stared into his brother's remaining eye. Something passed between them—old battles, old memories—and eventually Skagi nodded as if he understood. Tense muscles relaxed, and Ashok let go of Skagi's arm. The brothers sat back down together, ignoring the quiet stares of the caravan crew who'd seen the altercation.

Ashok remained standing. He faced the bard. "Tatigan needs to keep you on a shorter lead," he said quietly.

Daruk smiled ruefully. "I've made an enemy of you now, haven't I? Maybe if you heard me sing, you'd feel differently." He stepped away from the fire, inviting Ashok to follow. Ashok reluctantly left the others and walked away from the camp with him—anything to keep the bard away from Skagi.

"My quarrel is not with Skagi," Daruk said when they were out of earshot of the brothers. "Though his tale is an interesting one. I'll tell it, if you're curious?"

"I'll hear it from Skagi and no one else," Ashok said.

Daruk sighed. "Pity. It would help explain why he hates the humans in Ikemmu so much."

"I've never known Skagi to hate anyone other than his enemies," Ashok said.

"Oh, I see. You know him so well, after less than a year fighting beside him? How well do you really know any of them, Ashok?" Daruk asked. "How well do they know *you*?"

"They know me better than the brothers who raised me," Ashok said. He cursed himself. Why had he told the bard that?

But Daruk said nothing about his revelation. He watched the campfires from a distance and wrapped his dark green cloak close around himself. "You're a mystery to Ikemmu in so many ways, Ashok," he said. "I've heard your name whispered with so much confusion and doubt. The city doesn't know what to think of you. It sparks my collector's heart. Your secrets might be worthy of song."

"Why do you want to sing tales of the shadar-kai?" Ashok said. "As you said, we look down on your people. Where's the glory in singing for a race that scorns your creations?"

"Not you," Daruk said. His voice betrayed his excitement. "You keep yourself apart from all those petty grievances. Nothing ties you down—even the gods don't touch you. The

sword of Tempus hasn't marked your flesh. Do you have any idea what you could do with such freedom?"

"No more or less than I do now," Ashok said. "I fight for Ikemmu—"

The bard scoffed at that. He waved a dismissive hand. "Ikemmu will not last another generation. Trade is all that keeps the city from dissolving into civil war. Abandon the dreams of idealistic leaders, Ashok, and you'll sleep better at night."

"If you're so certain the city will fall," Ashok said, "why do you make it your home?"

"There's enough there to interest me, for now," Daruk said. He smiled and waved to the camp. "You'd better go back to your friends. I don't want them thinking I've dragged you off into the darkness." He chuckled as if at some private joke. "But listen to my songs, Ashok, and judge for yourself if they don't stir something in your blood."

He walked back to the large fire, and Ashok went to rejoin his friends. Mareyn had gone back to check on the Martucks; Ilvani was asleep by the fire wrapped in Ashok's cloak; Skagi had retrieved his bowl and ate in silence. Cree leaned over to speak to Ashok.

"What did the bard want?" he asked.

"As far as I could tell, he wanted to hear himself talk," Ashok said.

Cree nodded. "He looks harmless, but if he knows things about us ..." He glanced uneasily at his brother.

"Then he isn't harmless," Ashok said. "Don't worry about him now. Tomorrow, before dawn, we spar—just the three of us."

"We'll be there," Cree said.

Daruk's voice drifted across the camp. "All right, then, you've all had your supper and are no doubt congratulating yourselves on having survived another day of Tuva and Vlahna's death march, am I right?"

Chuckles and scattered applause met this pronouncement. The caravan leaders made rude gestures at the bard. In response, Daruk bowed.

“As some of you no doubt heard, the inestimable Tatigan Carrlock has recently suggested I earn my keep on this journey.” More laughter. “Friends, I’m here to answer that call. Shall we have a song or a tale?”

“Song!” the Martucks called out. “Something we can dance to.”

There were groans from the other side of the camp. “We’re too damned tired to dance,” someone complained. “Give us a tale, Daruk.”

The crowd went back and forth for a minute or so, until Daruk held up his hands. “My people have spoken”—Ashok detected a hint of disdain in the words—“and so it shall be a tale and a song.”

He turned, raised his hand straight up in the air, and the campfire twisted, shooting toward the sky in a violent cyclone.

Some of the caravan crew gasped and scooted back from the flames, but others acted as if they’d seen the spectacle before. Mareyn and the Martucks, except for the boy, whooped and applauded. The dwarf, Thorm, didn’t even look up from his meal.

Daruk spread his hands, and the fire split at the top and widened like a chalice in the air. “It’s all about theatricality, my friends. What is life without dramatics or scale? The fire is not a fire—it won’t burn you.”

“Tell that to my singed cloak,” one of the guards grumbled.

Daruk ignored him. “The fire is the field of battle, and if you look closer, you’ll see—”

Ashok saw. Rising up out of the flames were riders, tiny figures made of fire that rode in ordered lines. Daruk’s illusion made it look as if there were dozens, hundreds that rode off into the distance until they became smoke clouds.

From across the camp, Tatigan laughed and applauded. "The Tuigan at last, Daruk? I thought you'd never tell that tale."

"Everything in its time, green-eyed man," Daruk said. "It's been more than a hundred years, but true warriors and their quest for glory will never be forgotten. Though their conquest ended in tragedy, some of their spirits are still here. Those of us who've walked this road before have seen them wandering the wastes, waiting for a battle that was lost a long time ago. The nomad warriors of the plains rode out of their country with dreams of conquest in their hearts. Their leader, Yamun Khahan, took his armies into the west and fell to a Cormyrian king. But no one told the ghosts."

Sparks fell from the fire and hissed as they hit the snow. Behind a curtain of steam, Daruk stared up at the fiery riders and began to sing.

*"I hear the echoes  
Of these fallen flames  
I speak with their voices  
These tombs of the dead."*

Ashok listened to the melody created by the bard's voice. He sang unaccompanied, but the flames and their phantom story amplified his presence. Ashok had to admit, he'd never heard music like this. Daruk's song had none of the wavering qualities of Darnae's music. He sang with the assurance of a master. The music did stir him. Ashok felt the restlessness in his blood, the need to hold his weapon in his hands. When he glanced over at Skagi and Cree, he saw them similarly affected, despite Skagi's efforts to ignore the song and the fire.

Near their smaller fire, Ilvani had her eyes open. She listened to the bard's song, but she was not as enraptured as the others were. She closed her eyes again and pulled Ashok's cloak up over her ears.



The sparks fell like glittering jewels, each a fallen warrior. Daruk sang for them, and Ashok lost himself in the music. His breathing quickened. He remembered riding in his own fire upon the nightmare's back across the plains.

Suddenly, he had a vision of himself alongside the warriors of the steppes, men clutching their shortbows and guiding their horses with their legs as they fired on the armies of Faerûn. He looked at the warriors on either side of him, friends whose faces he'd never seen.

"If we're meant to die today," one said, and stretched out his hand to Ashok, "then I am more blessed than any other, to have you fight at my side."

"Yes." Ashok had never heard the warrior's language before, but somehow he understood the words. He reached for the warrior's hand. His vision blurred, and he was back at the camp, listening to Daruk's song end. The flame column dwindled until it was a simple cookfire again.

Panting, caught between the dream and reality, Ashok looked around. The crew and passengers prepared to sleep, and the watches had already set out from the camp. He felt light-headed and strange, as if his skin were too taut for his body. It must be the inactivity. His need for stimulation was manifesting in half dreams.

He settled down with his bedroll and tried to sleep. The watches changed shift twice before he was able to drift off into oblivion.



Ilvani stood at the edge of the camp and scanned the darkness for signs of movement. She saw none, but that didn't mean they weren't out there. Daruk's song still echoed in the air like a summons.

The fool, Ilvani thought. He should know better than to whisper to old ghosts.

She walked back to the camp and noticed Ashok tossing fitfully in his sleep. He shivered as if in the throes of a fever.

Slipping his cloak from her shoulders, Ilvani covered him and stepped back.

“You feel it too,” she whispered. “But you have no name for it.” She sighed. The night wasn’t over yet. Something was coming.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

ASHOK AWOKE TO FIND ILVANI CROUCHED AT HIS SIDE. SHE watched him intently, her brow furrowed in consternation.

"Do you know yourself?" she asked.

He looked around. The camp slept on peacefully. The fires burned steadily, fed by the watch guards.

"I dreamed that I was ... not myself," he said. "Someone called to me—"

"He's waiting," Ilvani said. "We have to go."

"Where?" Ashok stood up, fastened his cloak, and checked his weapons. Ilvani was already walking north out of the camp. She removed a crystal sphere from her pouch, spoke a word, and shook it. Reddish gold light filled the sphere and illuminated the night. Ashok untied the nightmare's reins and led the stallion after her.

"The flock is short one blade," the witch said. "Always alone, always left behind. Not tonight and not ever again. Maybe Daruk's song did serve a purpose."

"Daruk's song? Stop—Ilvani, wait. What am I walking into?"

She looked back at him over her shoulder. "A ride you'll never forget," she said. "Are you afraid?"

He shook his head.

She scowled. "Then stop making sounds. Come with me, so we can all be at peace tonight."

He followed her without another word, but he unlooped his chain from his belt and held it taut between his hands. The wind wafted snow crystals across the open ground and into their faces. Soon Ashok's exposed skin was numb from the cold.

This lack of feeling unnerved him and made him feel displaced from his flesh. They couldn't be away from the fire too long. The cold was becoming dangerous out here on the

deep open plain, and Tuva was right about the snow blindness. A more violent wind could make a seasoned tracker lose his way and freeze to death.

They reached a dip in the land—the remnants of a dry streambed. Boulders and dead brush had filled the streambed long ago. Ilvani went down on her knees and moved aside one of the lighter stones.

“This is the hard part,” she said. “It may not work.”

“What won’t work?” Ashok knelt beside her. “If we stay in the snow like this for very long, we won’t be able to walk back to camp.”

Ilvani closed her eyes. She seemed to be concentrating on something very hard. She set the sphere in the snow and removed the glove from her left hand. She held her hand up in the air between them.

At first, Ashok didn’t comprehend what she meant by the gesture, but then she looked down at his hands. He let go of his chain and took his gloves off. He raised his right hand but hesitated with his palm an inch from hers.

With a quick, striking movement, she grabbed his hand. Only then did Ashok realize her other hand rested on the stones, the remnants of what looked like a funeral cairn.

Energy pulsed through his body. Ashok’s heart stuttered, but he kept hold of her hand. The blowing snow froze in her hair, making stiff rods around her face. Her lips were blue as she spoke the words of a chant. The pulse came again, and Ashok had to close his eyes against the force of it even as he reveled in the awakening. The sensation was like plunging his frozen body into scalding water. He came alive again. He opened his eyes and tilted his face to the sky to savor the moment, though he did not understand its purpose.

By the light of Ilvani’s sphere, he saw the rider.

The human lay slumped across his horse, his arms dangling aside his head. Blood streamed from an arrow wound in his horse’s flank. The beast took a step forward and collapsed, dumping its rider in the snow.

Ashok pulled away from Ilvani and jumped to his feet. He ran to the man's side, but he didn't immediately see a wound. He brushed aside the human's dark hair to examine his head and feel for a life beat at his neck.

The man opened his eyes and spoke at the same time Ashok felt the dead, hollow space where his heart should have been beating.

"Palum," he said, "have you come to take me to the army?"

Ashok breathed in and out, harsh breaths that formed steam clouds. It took every bit of discipline he'd ever learned not to hurl the dead thing away from him and draw his chain to attack. The quavering in its voice stopped him. The thing that had no heartbeat looked at him with such imploring dead eyes that Ashok couldn't look away.

"Have you?" The man spoke again, but his words changed to a language Ashok had never heard before.

"You must answer him," Ilvani said. "We have to go soon, or they'll be on the move."

"I don't understand him," Ashok said. "I don't understand any of this. That thing shouldn't be talking. It should be in the ground."

"He is," Ilvani said. She laid her hand against the gravestones. "He sleeps, but he's not at rest. Two worlds fade into one. Didn't you hear him call to you?"

"I heard—" Ashok looked at the dead man's face, though it unsettled him greatly. The face did look vaguely familiar, and then he remembered his vision, the man who'd reached out his hand before some distant battle.

*If we're meant to die today ...*

"I'm Palum," Ashok said. The dead man looked at him and for whatever reason saw his friend's face. When Ashok said the name, the dead man's eyes filled with tears.

"I thought ... you would leave me behind," the man said. The language had reverted to Common. "I rode all night to

be here, but the brigands were waiting. I managed to evade them, but it was a hard fight.”

“You were victorious,” Ashok said. “Yet your horse—”

“Is here,” Ilvani said. She stood up and took the nightmare’s reins. The stallion watched the witch’s movements but allowed her to lead him to Ashok’s side. “You can ride together.”

The man looked up at the nightmare with an odd expression. “The horse is not ... I don’t see it....”

“It’s all right,” Ashok said. He draped the man’s arm over his shoulder and looked to Ilvani. She nodded, so he lifted the man to his feet and half carried him to the disguised nightmare. The stallion did not react to the dead man, so Ashok placed him across the nightmare’s back and mounted in front of him. The man’s hands came around his waist in a weak grip. Ashok held on to his arm and guided the nightmare with his legs.

“Where are we going?” Ashok asked Ilvani.

She pointed to the north. “Ride fast but not far. You’ll make it in time. I’ll meet you on the other side.”

The man turned to look at Ilvani. “Thank you,” he said.

“Hold on tightly,” she said. “You’re almost there.”

“You heard her,” Ashok whispered to the nightmare, and dug in with his heels. “Let’s see where the ride takes us.”

The nightmare took off across the snow-covered expanse. The wind turned fierce and drowned out all sound. Ashok could barely see through the blowing snow to keep them pointed north. He had to trust the nightmare to lead them. He felt the heat of the creature’s body and took comfort from that buried fire. They could use it if they had to. Would Ilvani be so warm, walking the plain alone? He had to trust her, too, the same way he trusted that the man clutching him was not some dead yet animated abomination.

You wanted to walk in Ilvani’s world, Ashok told himself. This might be your one chance to know the world as she knows it.

When he felt the man's voice at his ear, a voice with no breath behind it, Ashok gritted his teeth against the wrongness, the need to lash out and destroy.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

Ashok searched his memory for the name the man had called him. "Palum," he said.

"That's right. I thought.... Just now, I thought you were someone else. We will fight together, you and I?"

"Yes," Ashok said. To a battle that was already lost. If the man was one of the Tuigan from Daruk's song, he had no idea that his invasion failed and his people were defeated. All he knew was that he could not bear to be left behind.

"It would be safer for you to stay here," Ashok said. He thought the spirit didn't hear him above the wind, but he answered.

"To be safe is to lose my soul," he said. "I am a warrior. I must fight."

Ashok felt a chill that had nothing to do with the biting wind pass through him. The man spoke like a shadar-kai. "You're human," Ashok said. "You could be anything you wanted."

"No. My fate was decided from birth. I will follow its course and be proud."

"I'm carrying you to your death," Ashok whispered. Maybe that was Ashok's fate—the rider of nightmares, the bringer of death.

The land angled upward. The nightmare fought its way up a steep hill overlooking a broad valley. Ashok leaned forward with his burden to keep from falling off. When they reached the crest, the nightmare stopped and, with a startled cry, reared in the air.

Ashok surged forward to grab the stallion's neck. His hands brushed the enchanted necklace—it was hot, nearly hot enough to blister flesh. The magic strained to keep the nightmare's true nature in check.

It will burn out soon, Ashok realized. The necklace won't last the journey to Rashemen.

He would have to deal with that later. For now, he worked to keep the beast from bolting down the hill and leaving them trampled on the plain. After several minutes of curses, cajoling, and threats with his chain, Ashok got the nightmare to keep its four feet on the ground. Only then could he begin to take in what had upset the stallion so violently.

Behind him, the man loosened his grip on Ashok's waist and looked over his shoulder across the valley.

"We arrived in time," he said, and there was such profound relief in his voice that it almost distracted Ashok from the sight of the vast army spread below them.

Men and women on horseback, armed for battle, rode in ranks as if they'd been born on the back of a horse.

There must have been thousands. The ghosts of the Tuigan invaders prepared to follow their leader into battle. Ashok saw the wild exultation on their faces as they slapped blades and rode their horses side by side.

In the distance, a horn blared. The riders shouted in answer and formed into lines. Their horses reared and neighed in frenzy, eager to run. The nightmare quivered beneath Ashok. The call to battle had infected him.

"Time to go," the man said. "Will you ride with me, Palum?"

Ashok surveyed the steep slope into the valley. It would be a punishing ride, getting down to the army. He grinned and dug his heels into the nightmare's flank.

The beast took off at a dangerous gallop. Ashok leaned all the way back in his seat, grinding his legs into the nightmare's body to keep his balance. Snow and mud flew up around them. Ashok's teeth clamped together painfully at the jarring motions. Fire burned in his muscles. Then, with a final, wild leap, they were in the valley and riding among



the ghost horses and the Tuigan warriors. They saluted him with blades thrust in the air as he rode into their midst.

A fierce cry ripped from Ashok's throat. The roar of hoofbeats deafened him. The charging army was a furious storm tearing across the plain to meet its fate. Come what may, the riders were together, and in that breath, they were invincible. Ashok lost himself in that feeling of wholeness, just as he'd once done among the shadar-kai dancers in Ikemmu. Now he was a man among ghosts, but they looked at him and saw—what? Not a shadar-kai but a warrior—his soul marked him as one of their own.

They rode out of the valley and into blinding snow. Ashok's vision blurred. He raised a hand to see in the darkness, but there was no path to follow. Reluctantly, he reined in the nightmare and forced him to stop. When the wind died enough that he could see again, Ashok realized the ghost army was gone. He felt behind him, but his passenger had vanished as well.

Ashok slid off the nightmare's back and walked a few paces back toward the valley. There were no hoofprints, no signs to mark the horde of invaders as ever having existed.

He retraced his steps on foot, leading the nightmare. After only a few minutes, he came upon the stone cairn and the dark form of Ilvani crouched in the snow. Ashok sat down beside her and left the nightmare to rest.

He had too many questions, so he asked the most obvious first. "How did I get back here so quickly?"

Ilvani regarded him somberly. "I told you. You traveled fast but not far. At the end, he was so close to his army. He just needed a guide."

"I touched a spirit tonight," Ashok said. He looked at his hands. He hadn't put his gloves back on after touching Ilvani. "I didn't know it was possible to feel the touch of an undead thing without it corrupting my flesh."

"They do corrupt," Ilvani said. "But they do it insidiously—one small touch, then another and another."

“They’re restless. They pull and grab and overwhelm you,” Ashok said, understanding at last what she meant. “It’s enough to drive a person mad.”

“So they call me.”

“There’s power in your gifts,” Ashok said. “I’ve seen it and not just tonight.”

She looked at him curiously. Ashok put his hands on the cairn where the Tuigan warrior’s bones lay. Two worlds overlapping.

“Eight months ago, when I was imprisoned in the caves, waiting for the shadows to take me, I dreamed ...” It was hard for Ashok to speak of it, even after so many months. “I saw my father and”—he would not say Reltnar’s name in front of her, not ever again—“others I’ve killed. They waited to take my soul. Then you came to me in the dark. You drove back the shadows.”

Ilvani gave him a sympathetic look. “It wasn’t me.”

“No. I wanted it to be you—I still feel when I look at you that there’s a connection.”

“It’s safer to think that,” Ilvani said. “He knows that, as well as we do. That’s why He takes different shapes—me, Natan—he takes the pieces he needs and puts them on like puppets on the hand. The game isn’t fair.”

Ashok nodded, acknowledging her words, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to believe them, not entirely. It wasn’t just that he didn’t want to accept the weight of Tempus’s presence in his life. Ilvani *had* been there. She’d come to him in his cell and left her box of ashes. He’d given it back to her, but they’d never spoken of what it contained and how it had saved him, how her forgiveness had saved him. If she hadn’t been there, Ashok would have faded and been condemned to the void, a nightmare realm of lost souls.

How easily everything could have fallen apart—for himself and for Ikemmu. The shadar-kai constantly stood on the edge of oblivion in more than one sense.

“Daruk was right,” Ashok said.

Ilvani scowled. "About what?"

"That it might all fall apart—Ikemmu, Uwan's dreams for the city, and the shadar-kai. Tomorrow it could all be gone, and I wouldn't be able to stop it." He feared the fate of the city he'd come to call his home, but if Ikemmu fell, it would not represent the worst of his nightmares. As always, he had only to look to that beast of fire and death to find what he most feared.

When Ashok first began training the nightmare, the beast sent him dreams that invaded his waking life. The nightmare preyed on the fears of his victims, and for most shadar-kai, their worst fear was to fade and lose their souls to the void. In Ashok's visions, he'd feared losing his friends.

Skagi, Cree, Ilvani—all those companions he'd grown to trust—he'd never known a bond such as the one he shared with them. They'd seen him through darkness and accepted the best and worst parts of him. He'd already lost too many in the short time he'd lived in Ikemmu.

Chanoch, Vedoran, Olra—he'd lost his Camborr teacher so quickly, with barely a breath between the thought and the reality. With Chanoch, it had been slow, agonizing hours spent in the dark. Vedoran ... Ashok could not summon an image of the warrior's face without remembering their last embrace, when Ashok had driven a knife through his heart. What if Beshaba never claimed the warrior? Had Ashok condemned Vedoran to the void, his soul gone forever?

"The people who gave me life and purpose keep dying," Ashok said. "How do I know their souls reached their gods? That Tuigan warrior wandered for more than a century before he found his final rest." When I die, no god calls me home, Ashok thought. His father and brothers were still waiting in the shadows for him. He accepted that fate, but he would do anything to spare his friends. "I have to protect them."

"You can't change their fates," Ilvani said. "Souls slip through our fingers when we try to grab them, just like memories. In the end, they all fade."

"Then maybe it would be better if I had no companions at all," Ashok said, "nothing to touch me."

"Completely alone?" Ilvani said. "Then why not fade now and be one with the void?"

Ashok heard the anger in her voice. "What did I do wrong?"

"I thought you understood," Ilvani said. "You can't run from what you are. All you can do is face it. If you think Tempus will comfort you, then turn to Him, but remember what you have right now. The moment is what matters. Only the moment is real." Her voice quivered. "You have the power to recognize the truth from the shadows. It's a precious gift, as precious as life."

Ashok looked into Ilvani's eyes and for the first time saw the void that *she* feared most, the lurking shadows that threatened to swallow her. Ilvani was most afraid of becoming lost in the dark, of not being able to find her way home.

He didn't know how to comfort her. He wasn't made for gestures like that. Even if he was, he didn't think she would accept them. If he tried to take her hand now, she would retreat.

He felt along the ground until he found a flat piece of obsidian half-buried in the dirt and snow. He dug it out and held it up so she could see.

"This stone is real," he said. "But it came from the funeral cairn, so it belongs to the living and the dead." He held it out to her, and when she reached out her hand, he pressed the stone between their two palms. The cold, sharp edges dug into their skin, but their hands didn't touch. He looked toward the valley where the gathered Tuigan ghosts had prepared to ride out to glory. "When you remember this night, remember that those shadows couldn't touch you. The stone is this moment, here, between us. We are what's real."

"Real," she echoed. She pressed against the obsidian, and Ashok pressed back, until thin trickles of blood ran down

their palms. When he let go, Ilvani kept the stone, holding it in her two hands as if to make it and the blood a part of her. "We walk the darker road," she said. "There will be more spirits after this night."

"You mean because we're getting closer to Rashemen?" Ashok said. "What will happen to you in that land?"

"They're waiting for me," Ilvani said. She sounded afraid. "The telthors and the storm are waiting to claim their pieces of me." She closed her eyes and clutched the stone. "I wish we could live in the breath in between. Out of the shadows, away from all the spirits—right here."

"Is that what you want, Ilvani?" Ashok said seriously. "Do you still want to go to Rashemen? If you do, I'll take you there and back home again, but if you don't, we can turn and walk in the opposite direction tomorrow. You only need to choose the road, and we'll follow it."

She searched his face. Did she doubt his word? He wanted to tell her that he was not afraid of the darker road. In the end, she said only, "I'm cold."

"Let's go back to camp," Ashok said. "You don't have to make the choice tonight. The mountains still lie between the caravan and Rashemen. We have time."

They got back into camp well before dawn. Ashok knew he had missed his watch shift, but Skagi and Cree didn't question him until Ilvani was asleep in the back of the wagon. Then Ashok led them out of camp and into the trees for sparring. Skagi had scouted a clearing that would serve them. On the way, Ashok told them what he and Ilvani had seen.

When he'd finished, Cree looked agitated. "I've never seen anything like that before. This place ..." He drew his katars. The sound of steel leaving its sheath echoed loudly in the stillness. The snow-covered trees made a windbreak, though it was still bitterly cold. "On our watch shifts, sometimes I hear things, or I feel as if one of you is coming up behind me on my blind side, but then I turn and there's nothing." He

hesitated. "There's nothing, and yet I feel a presence so strongly, I can almost smell it."

"I won't pretend this place sits well with me, either," Skagi said, "but we can talk ghosts while we train." He spat and watched the spittle freeze in the snow. "This cold's starting to make me feel like one of those poor dead bastards you described."

They fanned out in a circle. Ashok drew his chain. "You two come at me first—"

"No," said Cree, "this time I want both of you to come at me."

Ashok and Skagi shared a glance. "Are you sure?" Ashok said.

"I can make up for the vision loss," Cree said. Ashok saw it cost him to say the words. "But it's not just my speed that suffers. My balance is off, and I can't compensate in a fight. I have to relearn."

Ashok nodded. "We'll start slow, then. Skagi, exploit his blind side and—"

Cree slapped Ashok's chain with the flat of his blade. "If you plan the attack in front of me, there's no purpose to this," he growled. "Either we do this as if we stood in the training yard at Athanon or not at all."

Before Ashok could speak, he heard movement in the trees. They turned to see Kaibeth and three of the other sellswords step into the clearing.

"I hope we're not interrupting anything," Kaibeth said. "We saw you leave camp and thought something was amiss. Now that we see you're planning some sport"—she glanced at Cree—"I'll fight you in earnest, Guardian, with pleasure." She drew her weapon, a single katar, and held it loosely in front of her. "You know your friends' movements, but with me you can pretend I'm really the enemy." She smiled. Ashok didn't like the expression.

Her companions carried daggers and scimitars. Ashok remembered they'd fought well on horseback against the

brigands. He'd watched Kaibeth ride by an enemy's horse and slice its rider's hand off with her blade.

Cree held up his own weapons. "I'll fight you," he said.

Standing beside Ashok, Skagi made a restless movement, as if he meant to argue, but Cree shot him a look that kept him quiet. Ashok moved back to give the combatants room, and after a breath Skagi joined him. Grinning, the other sellswords came to stand with them to watch the match. One of the men moved with deceptive casualness to stand behind Ashok. Ashok pivoted and looped his chain behind the man's head. He pulled the spikes taut and let them nip the back of the warrior's neck.

"You'll want to find another place to stand," Ashok said, rattling the spikes. "I wouldn't want you to get hurt by these."

The sellsword glared at Ashok. "If you think those little needles scare me—"

"Arveck!" Kaibeth snapped. "You'll have your turn. Be patient."

The sellsword didn't take his gaze from Ashok. "I have been patient," he said softly. "Tempus's emissary—I've been waiting a long time to see if you're as special as everyone claims. What do you think? Do you think you're special?"

Ashok let one end of the chain fall. He flicked his wrist, and the spikes hissed past Arveck's head just inches from his ear. Ashok caught the chain. The sellsword flinched in spite of himself. The look he gave Ashok when he realized his slip was one of hatred. It reminded Ashok very much of the expression he'd once seen in Vedoran's eyes.

"I'm not special," Ashok said, "and you know I have no allegiance to Tempus. If you want to fight, then we'll fight. I don't need a reason."

He met Arveck's stare. Unexpectedly, the sellsword smiled. "Good, emissary. In that case, I can wait a little longer. Go ahead, Kaibeth, play with the crippled one."

Ashok glanced at Cree, but the warrior ignored the taunt. He and Kaibeth circled each other, their katars testing the air. Arveck and his two companions backed away from Ashok and turned their attentions to the fight.

Skagi leaned in and whispered to Ashok. "Are you going to kill him?"

Ashok shook his head. "Much as I hate to admit it, we need him—all the caravan guards. You know we haven't seen the last of the brigands."

"Can I kill him?"

Ashok smiled. "Not today."

Cree and Kaibeth came together in a skittering clash of steel. The short reach of the katars brought the warriors into an intimate stance, their breaths mingling as they fought. The blades whirled so close to the skin that Ashok soon found his hands quivering from the tension. Then Cree nicked Kaibeth in the arm—the sellsword turned aside from the blow, but a thin stream of blood ran down her arm and stained the katar hilt.

"You get the first sting," she said, taking a moment to catch her breath. "You're faster than I thought."

"You should have seen me a month ago," Cree said. He darted in again, but she was ready for him this time. She flicked aside his blades and brought her knee up into Cree's stomach. The warrior coughed and gagged but kept his blades ready to punch against a follow-up attack. He teleported back a few feet, and Kaibeth broke off the attack to wipe her hands on her breeches.

She hasn't tried to exploit Cree's missing eye yet, Ashok thought. If he were in Kaibeth's place, he would try to take advantage of Cree's slowed reaction time to wear him down. Maybe she was trying to lull the warrior into a false confidence before she advanced on him from that side. Ashok didn't think Cree would fall into that trap, unless Arveck's words had affected him more than he'd thought.



When his form solidified, Cree came in again, low this time, and Ashok saw the warrior was trying to make up for his loss of speed with finesse. He worked his blades steadily and conserved energy, a discipline he hadn't shown before. It was working too. As Kaibeth tired, she slowed until they appeared evenly matched in speed, and then Cree surpassed her. When that happened, the warrior's katars became a blur of motion, and he sliced through her armor at the flank. Again she pulled away, giving ground, but this time Cree didn't let her retreat. He came at her hard. He put her purely on the defensive, and Ashok noticed her companions fidgeting and fingering their blades.

"Get ready," Ashok said to Skagi.

"I see them," Skagi replied. "We'll get to them before they make a move." He held his falchion at his side.

Kaibeth teleported behind Cree—to buy time, Ashok thought, but she had to know she was beaten. Ashok calculated how many blade swings she had left before Cree got past her defense. She became solid, blocked another strike, and spun, putting her body directly in Cree's blind spot. Cree saw the move coming and tried to compensate, but the sellsword pivoted in a burst of speed that shouldn't have been possible, given her weariness. She put her katar to the back of his neck and pressed down lightly. Cree flinched when he felt the blade kiss his neck, and a trickle of blood slid down his throat.

"You're dead," she said.

"So I am." Cree sheathed his weapons and wiped the blood from his throat. He seemed disgusted with himself. Kaibeth, instead of gasping for breath, as she had been a moment ago, appeared barely winded from the fight.

It had been an act, all of it. Even her companions hadn't seen it coming. Or had they? Maybe they had worked in tandem to create the illusion that the battle had turned. If so, Ashok had to admit he was impressed. The sellswords

had obviously fought together for months or years to know one another so well.

"You would have beaten me, but you were too worried about your eye," Kaibeth said.

Cree nodded. "I forgot all the other rules." He held out a hand. "My thanks for the reminder."

She clasped his hand and turned to Arveck. "Well?"

Arveck looked at Ashok. "Whenever the emissary is ready," he said in a tone of mock formality.

Ashok wondered if Arveck's ineptitude was all an act as well. He would find out soon enough. Ashok didn't hesitate but whipped his chain out at Arveck's head. The sellsword dodged the blow only by throwing himself backward. He lost his footing and went down on one knee in the snow.

"I'm ready," Ashok said.

Arveck let out a furious cry and jumped to his feet. He lunged in with his scimitar. Ashok teleported back a step, then charged forward onto the blade and passed right through Arveck's body. The sellsword spun around and half lunged again before he remembered that his blade couldn't hurt Ashok.

"There's no training in this," Cree said. "Finish him, Ashok, and be done. He's too hotheaded."

"Agreed," Kaibeth said. Arveck shot her a hateful glare, but the woman just laughed. "You're not ready for this fight. Accept it, and you won't be humiliated."

Ashok felt his body start to take on substance. He timed the strike, counting the breaths as the shadows coalesced into flesh. He struck out with the chain underhand. When Arveck blocked, the spikes wrapped around his weapon and his sword arm, tangling his curved blade and burying the spikes in the back of his hand.

Arveck snarled and clawed at the spikes with his other hand. Ashok didn't try to pull the chain taut. He just held the other end and watched Arveck struggle until he freed himself. In a blind fury, he charged Ashok.

Ashok readied his chain again, but Kaibeth stepped between them.

"Enough!" She absorbed Arveck's charge against her body and shoved him back. "This is done for today. The sun will rise soon, and I'll not have you riding unconscious, Arveck."

But Arveck was too enraged to listen. He made as if to charge again when Skagi stepped forward and thumped him on the back with his falchion hilt. Arveck went down on his knees again, but this time he stayed there, panting. Slowly, reason seemed to return, and he nodded at Ashok.

"Your battle," he said. "Enjoy the victory, whore of Tempus."

Kaibeth helped Arveck to his feet, and without a word, the sellswords left the clearing.

When they were alone, Skagi sheathed his falchion and sighed loudly. "Everyone gets to play but me."

"It was a humbling game," Cree said. He touched the katar cut on his neck. "She was right about the eye. I wasn't thinking of anything else."

"We've all made that mistake," Ashok said. "Fight as you've always done, with your speed and instincts, but don't discount the success you had with the slower, sustained approach. Skagi and I will watch your blind side. We should have been doing it before."

"We couldn't keep up with him before," Skagi muttered.

"That was a mistake too," Ashok said. "Kaibeth's warriors fought as one, even when they weren't in the battle together. That's what we need to become."

Cree shook his head. "And you a chainfighter. I never thought I'd hear you say such things."

"Neither did I," Ashok admitted. "I have things to relearn, as well. I'll teach my arm where to strike and keep the chain from stinging you two."

"Good to hear," Skagi said. "I don't need any more scars on my pretty visage," he said, his crooked lip warping in a smile.

“We had to relearn how to fight together, Brother,” Cree said, turning serious. “You remember that?”

His humor faded, and Skagi looked away into the trees. “You don’t have to remind me of it.”

“I was as much at fault. Skagi and I didn’t always fight as we do now,” Cree said to Ashok. “In fact, we used to hate each other more than any shadar-kai.”

Ashok couldn’t fathom it. He knew well the hatred that could exist between brothers, but he couldn’t imagine such emotions between Skagi and Cree.

“We were born to two of Ikemmu’s Sworn,” Skagi said tersely. “That’s what caused it, but the hatred’s forgotten.” He redrew his falchion and toyed with the end of Ashok’s chain. “Damn you, will someone fight me now? You promised me a sparring match, and I’ll get one.”

Ashok glanced at Cree and brought his chain up, holding it in both hands. Cree drew his katars. “Will the both of us be enough for you, Brother?” Cree said.

Skagi snorted. “If not, I’ll go and fetch Arveck.”

They shared a laugh but never let their guards down. One thing Ashok had always respected about Skagi and Cree was that they appreciated the deadly natures of the sparring matches. There was room for competition and jests, but a single lapse in judgment or control could result in death. Therein lay the challenge and the thrill—to beat the warriors who knew his skills so well and yet never yielded to the battle lust, to the need to kill.

Cree came at Skagi with his katars, deliberately leaving his left flank exposed. Ashok let his chain fly. The spikes struck the ground and kicked up lumps of wet snow. The move forced Skagi, who’d been trying to move in on Cree’s exposed flank, to retreat and get back on the defensive.

“Is that why you want to become Uwan’s Sworn,” Ashok asked, “because your father and mother held the rank?”

“We never knew either of them,” Cree said. He teleported behind Skagi, and Ashok, following his lead, teleported to

the space he'd just vacated.

Skagi turned in a circle, swiping at their shadowy forms, forcing them to keep their distance so they couldn't rush in and attack him when their forms solidified. "The woman who bore us wanted the pain, nothing else." He shot his brother a warning look. "Close your mouth, and keep your mind on your blades."

Cree ignored him. "Females have the power to bring forth life—new souls—while risking death," he said. "I've heard there's no experience like childbearing."

Ashok remembered there had been women in his own enclave with similar desires. Some kept the children they birthed. Others passed them on to the fathers or to those in the enclave who wanted the experience of raising and training sons and daughters but for whatever reason could not conceive. No matter their parentage, shadar-kai children were often left to fend for themselves at a young age, when their parents grew tired of their roles and sought new experiences.

"As the children of two Sworn, we were assumed to have great potential," Cree said. "Skagi was the elder. After he was born, several shadar-kai offered to buy him from our parents."

Cree's form solidified. Skagi came in hard and slapped his brother's flank with the flat of his blade. "Enough!" He pointed at Ashok. "I told you this was forgotten. If all we're going to do is flap our tongues, I'm finished here."

Cree started to argue, but he fell silent when he saw the anger in his brother's black eyes. Ashok said nothing. He gathered his chain and let Skagi lead the way back to camp.

Cree let Skagi get ahead of them, and when they arrived, he pulled Ashok aside. "I shouldn't have brought up the past," he said. "Skagi will tell you the tale someday—you might have to drag it from his lips—but he has reasons for his anger."

“Whatever his reasons,” Ashok said, “Daruk knows them too. He knew just where to strike at Skagi to bring out his anger.”

It made Ashok uneasy. Why had the bard made such a point of learning the brothers’ histories? And what might he know about Ashok? Ashok had no more secrets to keep from Ikemmu, but he knew nothing about Daruk or his motives. He thought about asking Tatigan, but the merchant had been absorbed with watching after his cargo for most of the journey, and when he wasn’t doing that, he was deep in conversation with the other merchants.

“Do you think he could be the traitor, the one who signaled the brigands to attack?” Cree asked. “You heard how furious Tatigan was that he didn’t fight with the caravan against them.”

“If he is working with them, you’d think he’d try harder to hide it,” Ashok said. “But it’s possible. For now, we’ll just have to watch him. He hasn’t proven himself a threat ... yet.”

Cree nodded, but something in the snow distracted him. He veered off the path abruptly and went into the trees. Curious, Ashok followed him. When they’d gotten several yards into the trees, Ashok saw the tracks in the snow, paw prints bigger than both his fists.

Cree squatted next to one of the pines. He brushed snow off the trunk to expose gashes in the bark. “Claw marks,” he said, “and I saw droppings just off the trail. A winter wolf—probably more than one.”

“Are they following the caravan?” Ashok asked. Tuva and Vlahna had warned them about the huge wolves that dwelled in this country, but Ashok hadn’t expected to encounter signs of them until they’d gotten closer to the Sunrise Mountains.

“Doesn’t look like it,” Cree said. “But we’ve invaded their hunting grounds. We’ll have to be cautious.”

“Let Tuva and Vlahna know what you found,” Ashok said. His gaze lingered on the huge tracks.

“Thinking about fighting one of them?” Cree said. He grinned. “We could use the sport.”

Ashok agreed, but he hoped Cree wasn’t tempting the gods by voicing the thought aloud.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**B**Y THE TIME THE CARAVAN GOT UNDERWAY, IT HAD STARTED snowing again, and the wind had changed direction, blowing directly into their faces. The horses and drovers bent their heads into the gale and pushed ahead, but by midday, their pace slowed to a crawl. The Golden Way, while not an actual road, was marked at intervals by the huge vertical stones, one always within sight of the next. But with the fierce wind and snow, the caravan crew was soon blind to even these markers. Rather than stop, Vlahna rode ahead with a torch and served as a marker between the stones to keep the caravan from straying off the route.

The snow and the wind harried them steadily for the next three days.

During those long hours of slow plodding on horseback, Ashok felt as if he'd fallen into a white void. The wind filled his ears with a hollow, painful whistling only barely broken by his cloak hood. He welcomed the icy needles of pain on his face, but all too quickly, the pain turned to numbness. To keep the frostbite at bay, the crew would have to wrap their heads with extra blankets, leaving nothing but the eyes exposed. Buried in darkness and numbing cold, Ashok felt real fear for the first time since he'd begun the caravan journey. The shadows of his soul stirred restlessly, even as his heartbeat slowed and his thoughts became sluggish.

A part of him railed against this, viciously berating his own weakness. He should be stronger than this. He'd spent a tenday in a dark cell in the caves of Ikemmu. This should not test him. But somehow it made the experience worse. He kept expecting to look into the snowbound wilderness and see his father and brothers beckoning to him with their corpse grins.



Another part of him—and this most frightening of all—welcomed the peace and solitude. At these times, his own body betrayed him. His mind drifted, floating in a dreamlike fog, and he had to resist the urge to slump forward against the nightmare's neck and sleep. Even the jostling motion of the beast beneath him and the rutted, uneven ground couldn't keep that sense of peaceful longing at bay. Absorbed by it, Ashok felt his fears start to ebb.

This was truly the most dangerous time. When he no longer felt afraid for his soul, he was the most in danger of it fleeing his body. Slowly, mechanically, he peeled his glove off his hand. The cold bit into his flesh immediately, and with it a bit of clarity returned. Ashok lifted his hand to his mouth, but he couldn't make himself bite his flesh. He didn't have the strength. What would it accomplish? Why break the peaceful stillness with blood? All he had to do was close his eyes and give in to the arms of the wind....

In the distance, Ashok heard a loud pop and an explosive hiss like a fire suddenly doused. A breath later, a blast of pure energy hit him in the chest.

The force blew Ashok off his horse. The nightmare reared and screamed, but Ashok couldn't move out of the way. He gasped at the sudden pain and awareness that flooded his mind. He looked down at his chest and saw a sunburst of black scorch marks on his bone scale breastplate.

Beside him, a similar blast knocked Skagi and Cree off their horses. The caravan halted as horses and passengers screamed. The drovers fought to control the beasts, but there was mass confusion as everyone tried to sort out where the attack came from.

Tuva broke through the mass of rearing horses to get to Ashok and the brothers. "What did you see?" he cried. His eyes, when he got close to them, looked glassy. He shook himself as if waking up from a long sleep. "Where are they?"

Ashok shook his head. He pulled himself to his feet using Tuva's stirrup. It wasn't the energy blast, but his own

weakness, that slowed him. “I couldn’t see; it came from nowhere.”

Cree and Skagi pulled themselves together. Their wounds were identical to Ashok’s.

“Did you see anything?” Tuva asked them. “What direction —”

“I’ve got her!” cried one of the guards. Tuva wheeled his horse away from Ashok. In the open space, Ashok caught a glimpse of Ilvani standing up in the back of the wagon ahead of them. One of Kaibeth’s sellswords had a dagger pressed to her throat.

Ashok pulled his chain off his belt.

“Let her go,” he said in a dead voice.

“She attacked you!” the sellsword cried. “I saw her hurl the magic at all three of them,” he told Tuva.

Kaibeth and Vlahna rode up from the front of the caravan, their faces swaddled in cloaks and masks. Kaibeth pulled hers down and barked at the sellsword. “Vertan, explain this.”

“She’s the traitor,” Vertan exclaimed. “Tuva said someone in the caravan was working with the brigands. It’s her—she sabotaged us from within.”

Some of the guards came to the back to see what was going on. When they heard Vertan’s words, they tightened their grips on their weapons. Ashok saw all this, but he ignored it. He took a step forward, then another. He couldn’t attack with his chain without the possibility of hitting Ilvani. But he could kill the shadar-kai with his own dagger if it came to that. He just needed to get close enough.

Tuva saw him and wrenched his horse around to get between Ashok and the wagon. “Everyone, stay back,” he barked at the other onlookers.

For her part, Ilvani appeared detached from the proceedings. She remained perfectly still. Her eyes skimmed over Ashok’s and the brothers’ wounds, but otherwise she seemed at ease.

“Explain your actions, Ilvani,” Vlahna said. “Is Vertan speaking the truth?”

“Yes, I attacked them,” Ilvani said without looking at Vlahna.

The guards around them tensed, but Tuva snarled, “If anyone makes a move to violence, I’ll cut off his hands. Is that clear?”

Ashok’s body remained rigid to the point of trembling. He stood poised to strike if anyone so much as flinched.

“Why did you do it?” Vlahna asked Ilvani. “You knew someone would see you.”

“There wasn’t time to ask permission,” Ilvani said. Her gaze turned inward. “I felt the raven fly, and I couldn’t trap it. The wind was too strong.”

Uneasy murmurs went through the gathered crowd.

“You’re crazy,” Vertan said, “just like they said. You and your brother—you’re no prophets of Tempus—you’re just insane.”

Ashok prepared to make a jump for the wagon, but Ilvani spoke again.

“His soul was at rest too long,” she said. She spoke slowly, as if trying to sort out the words. “I felt it go, and there was nothing left to save. The shadows rose around the rest.” She met Ashok’s eyes. “I knew it wasn’t real, but the danger was real. I had to call you back.”

And suddenly, shaking off the rage and battle tension so he could think clearly, Ashok understood.

“Let her go,” he said again, but this time he was in control of himself. “She did it to save us. We were starting to fade. She brought us back from the edge.” He looked at Skagi and Cree, who nodded.

“I didn’t even know my own name,” Skagi admitted. “I was lost.”

“They’re lying to protect her,” Vertan insisted. “They’re all traitors—”

"You should look to your own," Ashok said, addressing Kaibeth. "You heard the witch. A soul flew."

Kaibeth's black eyes widened as comprehension dawned. She wheeled her horse around and rode out from the caravan to find the rest of her sellswords. Ashok saw Tuva and Vlahna exchange grim looks. Vertan kept the dagger at Ilvani's throat until Kaibeth returned, galloping into their midst with her hood thrown back and a haunted expression on her face. Her breeches were soaked, as if she'd been kneeling in the snow.

"Arveck's dead," she said. "It looks as if he fell off his horse about a mile back. No one ... I didn't even see him fall." She looked up at Vertan and said wearily, "Let her go, you fool, and come help me retrieve Arveck's body."

Vertan's arm went slack. He dropped his dagger and stepped around Ilvani to get down from the wagon. He caught her eye and quickly looked away.

"Accept my apologies for Vertan," Kaibeth said to Ilvani before she rode away. "You likely saved us all."

The words were hard for her, but she'd said them. Ashok watched Tuva ride away with Kaibeth to help with Arveck. Vlahna went to get the rest of the crew back in line.

Ashok, Skagi, and Cree went to Ilvani's wagon. The witch sat down and rubbed her neck where the dagger blade had been. Ashok saw the tremor in her hand, and she murmured something under her breath.

"... were just useless again," he heard her say. "Cut them off."

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

She looked at him and the brothers, their scorched chests, and the snow in Ashok's hair. "You're back," she said, sounding satisfied.

"Thanks to you," Cree said.

"Did he hurt you?" Skagi said. In his own grumbling way, he sounded more solicitous than usual.

"It burns my skin where they touch," Ilvani said. "It always does."

Skagi nodded. His manner toward the witch had subtly altered, and not just because of what had happened here. Ashok sensed a connection, however tenuous, between Ilvani and the people around her, which hadn't existed before, even in her most coherent moments. She was starting to be able to gaze into one world and communicate what she saw to this one. And as Ilvani's hold on this world tightened, the connection between herself and others grew stronger. Ashok wondered if she was beginning to separate what was real and what wasn't. She hadn't found this level of clarity since she'd received her vision from Tempus about Natan's death and communicated it to the rest of Ikemmu.

Vlahna rode back to them. "We're camping for the night," she said. "There are some ruins up ahead, an old caravansary that should give us defensibility and enough shelter from the snow for fires. We're going to lose another full day's travel, but there's no use trying to go any farther in this weather. It could get more of us killed."

"So could staying in one place," Cree said.

Vlahna nodded grimly. "At least this way we can keep an eye on one another."

She rode off, and Ashok and the brothers helped the rest of the crew make camp at the ruins. The rundown stone structures, skeletons of an old trading post, provided enough cover to shut out some of the constant wind, and there were fire pits already dug that just needed the snow cleared away.

Ashok saw Tuva speaking with Tatigan and some of the drovers. He assumed they were making arrangements to bury Arveck.

Daruk walked through the camp sometime later, whistling to himself. "Music we'll have tonight, another tale, another song," he said. "Come join me and dance, friends! We have to give the shadar-kai something to chase away the gloom

and cold. We want their spirits here with us, don't we, friends?"

It was difficult for Ashok to tell if the bard was serious or if he was mocking them all with his encouragement. But the thought of music and movement, anything to keep the numbing cold at bay, seemed to cheer the whole crew, and they worked quickly to get tents set up and cookfires going.

He finished securing the nightmare and several of the other horses when Mareyn came over to him with two bowls of stew. She handed him one of the bowls and tossed him a chunk of bread to go with it. Ashok caught it and nodded his thanks.

"I was sorry to hear about your friend," Mareyn said. "Arveck."

"He wasn't a friend," Ashok said. "He was one of Kaibeth's men."

"I see." She pointed with her bread at the scorch marks on Ashok's bone scales. "Looks like the witch hit you with a nasty spell."

"Nasty enough to keep me alive." He took a bite of stew. The meat in it was on the verge of spoiling, but they needed to use as much of it as they could in case they lost more time on the road. He dipped his bread in the broth and took a bite. The meat would give him energy, but the flavors did nothing to stimulate his senses.

"Gods, this is horrid." Mareyn dumped the contents of her bowl on the ground and ate the rest of her bread. "Oh and look—more good news approaches."

Thorm, the black-bearded dwarf, stalked toward them. Ashok had seen little of the merchant during their journey, and he was more surprised to see the look of anger on his normally emotionless face.

"Where's your little dog, Mareyn?" the dwarf demanded. "He's always the first one by the fires at night, so why isn't he there now?"

"I left him with his mother and father," Mareyn said patiently.

The dwarf grunted in what Ashok supposed was appeasement, but he still glanced around the camp as if searching for the boy. "He has no business rooting through my wagons. Spell components, potions—the boy could get hurt."

"I gave you my word he wouldn't be a bother again, and he hasn't been, has he?" Mareyn said. "Go away, Thorm. You're souring my stomach, and that's saying something, after this meal. I tell you it won't happen again."

The dwarf nodded, satisfied, but he still walked away grumbling. Mareyn rolled her eyes and wiped her hands on her breeches.

"Les really doesn't mean to be a pest," she said. "But he has no place in a caravan crew—any fool except his parents can see that. It's not the life for him, so what can he do but go poking about in other lives to see if any of them fits?"

"How did you come to be his guardian?" Ashok asked. They went to sit near one of the fires while Ashok finished his stew.

"Luck, of course," Mareyn said with a grin. "I came to Ikemmu with a caravan because I wanted to train in katar fighting, and I knew there were warriors in the city I could learn from. What I didn't know was that the shadar-kai are reluctant to share their knowledge with humans. I didn't have enough coin to buy training from the sellswords, so I took up work with the caravans again until I could afford it. By that time I was in love with the traveling, and then I met the Martucks."

"This is a hard country to love," Ashok said, looking around at the bleak white landscape, "almost as hard as the Shadowfell."

"The harder the journey, the more interesting the people you meet along the way," Mareyn said. She caught his skeptical expression and laughed. "I know that sounds like

something you say to comfort yourself on the nights when you're freezing and wondering why you ever signed up for this job—and I've had my share of those nights—but I found it's true almost every time. Speaking of interesting," she added, and her voice lost some of its cheerfulness, "Thorm is a strange one. I don't know him well, but something about him doesn't feel right."

"Because of what happened with the boy?" Ashok asked.

"Partly. It's what Les *isn't* telling me about rummaging through Thorm's wagon that worries me," Mareyn said. "I wasn't there when it happened—Thorm brought the boy to me afterward. And I know the dwarf has a temper, but whatever he said to Les when he caught him put the fear of the gods in that boy. When I talked to him later, he wouldn't say a word about what happened or what he saw in Thorm's merchandise. It makes me think he has something to hide."

"Maybe, but if he was truly worried the boy might expose something, he would have killed him when he caught him at the wagon," Ashok reasoned. He saw Mareyn's face tighten, and he added quickly, "I don't think there's any danger to him now, but I'd keep a tight rein on the boy just to make sure."

Mareyn nodded. "In the meantime, will you and your companions help me watch Thorm to see if he does anything suspicious?"

Ashok nodded. He noticed Daruk over by the main fire. The bard's eyes were alight—he was preparing his tale. What song would he sing? Would it recall the ghosts of the Tuigan warriors? A rush of feeling flowed through Ashok at the memory of that night. He would never forget riding with the spirits of the warriors.

"Have you traveled much with Daruk?" Ashok asked Mareyn.

Mareyn shot a glance at the bard. "Enough that I should know his life story—the man loves to talk, and if you get him



going, he won't stop, but I don't know a single thing about his past before he came to Ikemmu."

"Yet he seems to know everything about the people of Ikemmu, especially its shadar-kai," Ashok said.

"He's up to mischief tonight," Mareyn said. "I can see it in his eyes. Usually means trouble for the rest of us." She glanced up at the sky. "Tymora, you're making my skin tingle. Do you have a game going that I don't know about?"

She spoke to her goddess in a conversational tone, with none of the reverence that filled Uwan's voice when he addressed Tempus. Ashok found himself growing more curious about Mareyn. "Your prayers sound like banter with a companion," he said. "Won't Tymora be offended by that informality?"

"Why should she be offended?" Mareyn said. "She *is* my companion, the one who walks with me always."

"And that doesn't disturb you," Ashok said, "the thought of your goddess always watching?"

"Not at all—I find comfort and joy in her presence."

"Hovering, controlling ..."

"Guiding, protecting ..." She grinned at his expression. "Our relationship with the gods is as much about how we see them, as how they truly are. They are what we need them to be."

"What if all we want is for them to leave us be?" Ashok asked.

"Then maybe you look to the wrong god," Mareyn said.

Ashok started to reply, when across the camp, Daruk stood up, circled the fire, and clapped his hands to draw the people's attention.

"What have you got for us, Daruk?" one of the drovers asked. "Tales of a warm, soft bed filled with warm, soft women?"

"Don't be crude, Ceylis." The bard shook a finger at him and grinned. "In the cold, cold night, when we breathe the frozen rain, what relief is there for us to find? We are men

and women of the road. Where does our solace lie? Only in this: our camaraderie, our fellowship, and a little theatricality.” He spoke in a playful, singsong rhythm, his voice as smooth as a glass of wine. “What have I got for you? Be careful what you wish for, friends. I’m going to sing to you a bit and speak to you a bit. I’m going to chew my words and make you swallow this bitter cold tale told to me by my father and his father before him. The more I sing, the more I whisper this sticky story, the closer I get to freeing myself of its bitter savor. This is how I work my magic—this is how it all starts.”

There were scattered chuckles and groans from the crew.

“Knows he’s got an audience,” someone muttered.

“Tonight, in honor of fallen friends, I’ll sing you a story about the mighty shadar-kai and their illustrious city of Ikemmu,” Daruk said. He glanced at Ashok, then at Kaibeth and her sellswords. The brothers sat with Ilvani across from the main fire. Skagi caught Ashok’s eye and shrugged. Who knew what the bard intended?

“A child’s song—just the one or two verses, and we’ll see how much worse it gets from there.”

Daruk circled the dancing flames. The firelight reflected in his dark eyes made them look almost black, like a shadar-kai’s. He spoke a phrase and made a sudden gesture that thickened the smoke and shaped it into two figures, male and female.

“Once there were two gods: the *mighty* Tempus,” Daruk shouted with exaggerated movements, thrusting his arms to the sky, “and Beshaba, the Lady of Misfortune. They liked to throw the dice, this pair, and bicker and pick, pick and bicker. Their dice were gray cubes with small black eyes—wild, weary skin-cutters, the shadar-kai.” He bowed to Ashok and his companions. “They threw the dice and never made nice with this race that was a prize to each.

“Then one day, Shar came to play.” He gestured again, and a third, larger smoke figure joined the game. It hovered

between Tempus and Beshaba, undulating in the air.

“Poor Tempus, poor Beshaba,” Daruk said loudly, over the jeers of both the brothers and the sellswords. “They didn’t like to play with Shar. Her toys were bigger than theirs—floating cities in the air. Her shadar-kai were bigger too, but she still wanted more. She made nice with the war god and the sad god.” The smoky figure of Shar offered Beshaba a bracelet of wispy vapor and gave to Tempus a gray, finely formed dagger.

Ashok watched the apparitions of Tempus and Beshaba clutch their new toys jealously while Shar looked on. Daruk walked up to the fire, and Shar put out her hand to caress his face. He undulated to match her movements, then broke away from the dance to stand before the brothers and Ilvani.

“Everyone was happy, but then one day Shar came back to the game, and she said just this: ‘Foolish sister, you never did know that band I gave you was a snake, and brother Tempus’s sword is clay. I played the game with loaded dice, and now you pay the price, for the shadar-kai are mine.’ ”

Daruk waved a hand and the figures vanished, wreathing him briefly in a cloak of smoky vapor. He bowed and stayed bent so he was at eye level with Ilvani. “What do you think of this story, witch?”

Ashok sat tense, but Ilvani just stared at him with a detached curiosity, the way she often scrutinized the trees or bushes. “You talk a child’s truth,” she said blandly, “black and white, the colors are right. I can make a rhyme, but it doesn’t make it true.”

Skagi burst out laughing, and there were even chuckles among the sellswords. Daruk smiled, exposing rows of white teeth. He bowed deeper to the witch and went back to his place by the fire. He started singing a low-voiced melody that eased the tension in the air. The humans talked among themselves, and the Martucks got up to dance to the slow music. After a while, a few of the others—all humans—joined them.

Ashok and Mareyn moved to the main fire to sit with Ilvani, who watched the humans and their gentle movements.

"Well, that was a waste of time," Skagi grumbled. "What did he mean with all that godsdamned smoke?"

"A shadow puppet show with the gods—I didn't think Daruk was quite that arrogant," Mareyn said.

"Or foolish, to taunt the shadar-kai like that," Cree said.

"Doesn't matter—Ilvani put him in his place, didn't you, witch?" Skagi said.

Ilvani didn't appear to be listening. "Dancing isn't a punishment," she said.

Ashok followed her gaze to the Martucks, who danced close together in each other's arms. "Not the way they do it," he agreed.

"Is that why none of the shadar-kai are dancing?" Mareyn said. "I know your people dance. I've seen the fire circles." She grabbed Ashok's hand. Reluctantly, Ashok let her pull him to his feet.

They walked to the fire and joined the rhythm of the dance. At first, Ashok remained distracted by Daruk's performance. Cree was right. The bard had done it deliberately to provoke the shadar-kai. Was it just a ploy to stoke their anger and stimulate their souls, or was there a deeper meaning?

"What's wrong?" Mareyn asked, drawing his attention back to the dance.

"Nothing," Ashok said. He pulled her closer in imitation of the Martucks.

As the dance continued, Ashok found himself analyzing the experience to see how it affected him. There was no danger, of course, no pain—the pleasure came in holding his partner, sharing the ritual as they moved in tandem. The mutual pleasure fed off itself and heightened Ashok's awareness of Mareyn. Her nearness brought him her scent, and he felt the ridges of her muscled shoulders under his hands. She let him explore the angles and curves up and

down her arms and back as they danced, while her fingers toyed with the scars on his neck.

Daruk's song and their slow, rhythmic swaying had a lulling effect on Ashok's mind, but he was not afraid. His body understood the purpose of the ritual. The purpose is not peace, Ashok thought, but prelude. The dance was a joining, though not in the same way his people experienced it in the fire circles. He recognized the connection between him and his partner, though it had been a long time since he'd felt it. He waited for her to guide him, and she did.

Daruk's melody carried on for some minutes, but Mareyn led Ashok away from the firelight and deeper into the ruins. He followed, his hand held lightly in hers.



Ilvani watched Ashok and Mareyn disappear among the battered stones. The music tapered off, and the dancers headed off to sleep. She noticed Kaibeth and most of her sellswords had sought out partners—some human, some shadar-kai—for their own liaisons. Kaibeth led Cree to her bedroll, and Skagi moved off with one of the human guards. None of them would risk fading again, not tonight.

Ilvani felt eyes on her and looked up to see Daruk coming toward her. The bard sat down in the spot Ashok had vacated and nodded to where he and Mareyn had disappeared.

"See that? Somebody appreciates my music," he said. He looked at her narrowly. "Or perhaps you didn't want the song to end that way? If so, my deepest apologies." He put his hand, fingers spread, over his heart in a gesture that was anything but sincere.

"I wasn't listening to the song," Ilvani said.

He laughed. "Of course you weren't. You truly don't care that he's with her, do you? I thought I had it all sorted out between the two of you, the way he watches you all the time. It's strange. If you were human—"

"I'm not," Ilvani said. "Neither is he."

"You're both a bit odd, on top of that. Which one is the more broken, I wonder?" Daruk said idly.

At that, a small, wicked smile lit Ilvani's face. "You are," she said. "The rest of us are at least trying to mend ourselves, but you revel in being broken, Daruk, exiled bard of Netheril. Daruk, beloved of Shar."

The amusement died out of his eyes, but his voice remained serene. "Did Tatigan tell you that?"

Ilvani shook her head. "I'm a collector, too, but I don't want most of the secrets I hear on the wind."

"You're a prophet, just like your brother was," the bard said. "Does Tempus whisper the future in your ear?"

"No, I hear only insects buzzing, insects and bards," she said.

His good humor restored, he laughed. "My apologies again. I wasn't paying proper attention to you before, but I will, starting now. You're going to be a player in this game of mine, aren't you?"

"Whether I choose to or not," Ilvani said. She glanced toward the stones where Ashok and Mareyn had disappeared. "That's the way it's going to be."



Later, Daruk sat with Tatigan before one of the smaller fires. The flames were slowly dying, though Tatigan poked the embers valiantly with a stick. Giving up, he took out a bottle of Theskian wine and filled two goblets. Daruk took his and drained it in a couple of swallows. Tatigan sighed at the waste of a good vintage.

"I recognize that look on your face," Daruk said dryly. "I've done something to disappoint you again. Gods, how I hate to fail you, Tatigan. What is it this time?"

"You shouldn't provoke them," Tatigan scolded the bard, "not out here in the wilderness. They're not playing a game. All they see is you insulting their gods, and for that offense,

the less disciplined among them could turn on you in a heartbeat. They are ruled by passions you obviously cannot comprehend.”

Daruk lay down on his bedroll with his hands clasped behind his head and one leg thrown over his knee. He closed his eyes, but a wide smile split his dark face. “Are you honestly suggesting I should be afraid of Ikemmu’s shadar-kai?” The distaste was thick in his voice.

“You’re a long way from home,” Tatigan pointed out. “If you’re going to dwell in Ikemmu, you’d do worse than to make a few friends among its warriors.”

Daruk sighed. “I tried with Ashok, but I don’t think he likes me, which is a shame. I could compose songs about that one, battle anthems that might fill the hole in my poor heart.”

“You think Ashok will fill the void left by Netheril?” Tatigan shook his head. “No man can replace an empire.”

“He’s the only warrior in Ikemmu whose skill and taste for blood rival that of the shadar-kai of Netheril,” Daruk said. “If he’d been raised in the empire, I’d already be writing songs about him.”

“But he wasn’t and you’re not,” Tatigan said. “Instead, you’re on the run from the same people you hold in such reverence. If they found you, they’d happily tear you to pieces.”

He poured more wine for them both. “The shadar-kai of the Shadowfell, especially Ashok, won’t be the domesticated creatures of the Shades. I’ve made a study of both peoples. They have a different destiny than their forebears. Whether it’s to destroy themselves or make a civilization in Ikemmu, I honestly couldn’t say.”

Darnae always talked about her great hope for the race, Tatigan thought, but at heart, she was overly romantic. Ashok has no illusions about the nature of his race.

“Well, I’m not going to try to predict the outcome either way,” Daruk said. “But I think Ashok will surprise you by how

much a part of the darkness he really is. He might relish a taste of true power. Ah, now that's an interesting notion. Perhaps I will pursue it."

"Do nothing foolish," Tatigan said, a threat implicit in his tone. "Not on my caravan."

"Of course not, my friend," Daruk said. "I will do nothing to the detriment of you or your people. You have my word."

Tatigan wondered what such a gift was worth.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ILVANI DREAMED, AND IN HER DREAMS, THE RASHEMI WITCH stood over her as she lay in the middle of a vast battlefield. Tuigan corpses lay strewn about in their death poses. Their faces all turned toward her, accusing. Blood soaked the ground.

"It's coming," the dead witch told Ilvani. "I hope you're pleased."

"What?" Ilvani tried to stand up, but the wind blew in fierce gusts that bore shards of glass. The pain knocked her off her feet. "We have to run!"

"Yes, run," the woman said mockingly, "before it's too late. Run, run. You said you'd help me!"

Blood poured from a wound in the woman's stomach. Ilvani saw the blood eat up the ground and come toward her like a living creature. Behind the witch, in the distance, the storm approached.

Ilvani got to her feet and stumbled away, but she knew she couldn't outrun the vicious wind. It sliced open her arms, legs, cheeks, and hands, until she couldn't see her own skin for the blood.

Ilvani screamed until her throat was hoarse. She screamed until she woke herself and realized that the rest of the camp was screaming too.

It was still dark, but fires moved among the ruins—the guards and drovers ran about, swinging torches in the air. She caught a glimpse of Kaibeth, shouting orders to some of the others, her face and hair bloodied.

"Keep the fire on them!" she yelled, and disappeared again into the darkness.

Ilvani stood up. Smoke poured from a mass of gray-black flesh on the ground not far from where she'd slept. The putrid stench of its burning filled Ilvani's nose, and she gagged. Unwillingly, she started toward it to see what it was,

but then in the smoke and darkness, she saw three large lumbering shapes just out of reach of the torchlight. Then came the sound of a great impact, bones crushed, and a body flew out of the darkness and landed at her feet.

She stared at the dead man's sightless eyes. He had a hole in his skull. Chips of white bone stuck to his forehead. Strangely, his lips and the left side of his face were blue with frost.

Ilvani stretched out her awareness and felt an unnatural aura surrounding the camp. She realized then that the air was much, much colder than it should have been, even for the winter night.

"Fire," she said. She lifted her right hand and called again in the tongue of magic. Her hand burst into orange flame. Torch in hand, she walked purposefully toward the lumbering shapes. She had to find Ashok and tell him it was time to release the nightmare and its deadly flame.

Otherwise, the ice trolls would kill them all.



Ashok was far enough away in the ruins that he didn't hear the screams heralding the first attack. He awoke at the same time as Mareyn. Stiff in his arms, she listened with him to the sounds of frantic movement and shouts from the camp. Then they moved at once, grabbed clothing and weapons, and ran into the darkness.

They were in such a rush that they nearly ran up the back of one of the trolls.

A blast of frigid air assailed Ashok's limbs. Beside him, Mareyn gasped when she ran into the troll's aura. She fumbled for her weapon, and Ashok swung his chain above his head. Their movements were sluggish, hampered by the frozen air. Ashok's breath was a fire in his lungs.

The troll heard them and swung around, its huge maul leading. Mareyn dived out of the way and rolled in the snow. Ashok dodged and let his chain fly over the troll's weapon. It

struck the monster in one of its black, jewel-like eyes. The troll howled in pain and clutched its face. Retreating several paces, it stepped into the light of one of the campfires, and Ashok got a good look at it.

The monster had gray, lumpy skin and a fine coat of frost-rimed hair all over its body but especially around its thick lips. Oversized ears were black at the tips. They drooped almost to the creature's shoulders. The frost gave its skin an odd, glittering quality like crystal in the light of the campfires.

Mareyn came up in a flurry of snow and steel. She stabbed the troll in the thigh while it was still distracted with its wound. The creature took a blind step toward her and swiped at her with its free hand. Mareyn tried to dodge again, but the cold aura emanating from the creature made her clumsy. Troll claws caught her by the arm and lifted her into the air. She hit the remains of a stone wall and fell on her stomach.

Ashok hollered to get the troll's attention and let his chain fly again. The troll turned back to face him, and Ashok fumbled the strike when he saw the creature's face.

The monster's eye wound had closed. Only the dark blood on its face marked where he'd injured the thing. This rapid healing was bad enough, but the look in its eyes truly gave Ashok pause. Its eyes were feverish, unfocused, almost as if the creature didn't fully understand where it was or what it was doing.

This was not the attack of an organized party of trolls seeking food. These mad creatures craved blood and violence just like the shadow beasts that Tuva's caravan had encountered on the plain.

Ilvani's demons had followed her to the surface of Faerûn.

Mareyn groaned and pulled herself to a sitting position. "Fire," she said. "We have to burn them."

*Them.* Ashok turned and saw three other shapes silhouetted in the campfire lights. Trolls surrounded the

camp.

He heard the distant screams of the horses. They ran free, terrified as they fought to escape the trolls. One of the creatures burst through a partial stone structure and grabbed a fleeing horse by the neck. The poor animal's scream cut off abruptly as the troll snapped its neck.

Ashok knew at least one of the animals wouldn't be running.

"I have to find my horse," Ashok said to Mareyn. He struck the troll with the end of his chain, again drawing blood and a scream from the monster.

"What?" Mareyn cried. "They're scattered, Ashok." She got to her feet and came at the troll's back, slashing with her blade. The creature kept its attention on Ashok and the chain. It held one hand over its face and swung its maul with the other.

Ashok took the blow to his shoulder and went down on his knees. His armor took some of the impact, but he still felt brilliant pain light up the left side of his body. The troll stood over him and raised his maul for an overhand strike that would drive Ashok into the ground. Ashok waited until the last second and teleported out from under the weapon. When he reappeared several feet away, he heard the shuddering impact of the weapon with the ground.

With the troll bent over and off balance, Mareyn came in from its left side and chopped overhand at the creature's head. The troll scuttled back out of the way with surprising grace, but it wasn't fast enough. Mareyn's strike severed its left ear.

Perfect, Ashok thought. The troll held the side of its head and thrashed, spraying blood on the snow. In his shadowy form, Ashok moved to stand in front of the creature. The troll looked up at him and snarled.

Ashok smiled at it.

The troll screamed and dived at him, but it passed through Ashok's incorporeal body and slid in the snow. Ashok felt his

flesh thicken and take on weight. He bent and scooped up the troll's ear.

"Come and get it," he said, then turned and ran. "Help the others," he yelled to Mareyn. "Find your good-luck partner."

"You're insane!" she called after him. He didn't turn, but he heard the wild laughter in her voice.

Ashok ran through the remnants of the camp. He saw the fires among the stones. The guards and drovers waved torches and weapons at the trolls when they attacked out of the darkness. Bodies of the caravan guards lay strewn about the ruins. Ashok didn't see the brothers or Ilvani, but he trusted Mareyn to find her.

He heard a horse scream and saw Thorm at the edge of the camp. He was trying to mount the nightmare. The illusion held—the beast still appeared to be a common saddle horse. The dwarf had no idea what he was trying to tame.

"Godsdamned beast ... hold still!" he cried, but the horse kicked him aside, and Thorm fell. He clutched his gut and winced in pain.

"Leaving us?" Ashok said. The troll's thundering footsteps echoed close behind him. "Or were you planning to ride into battle to save the caravan?"

"The caravan's lost," Thorm said. "Get out while you still can. We can go together—"

"Then you and your brigands will come back later to clean up what's left," Ashok said. The dwarf paled, and Ashok knew all he needed to about the dwarf's loyalties. "The perfect plan. Here, hold this."

He tossed the troll's ear at the dwarf. Thorm caught it without looking, and his eyes widened when he saw the troll bearing down on them.

Ashok jumped on the nightmare's back. The beast reared, forcing Ashok to grab his mane to keep his balance.

"Missed me, did you?" Ashok grunted. With his fists buried in the nightmare's mane, he wheeled the stallion around to face the troll. "See that? Time to play."

The troll swung its maul wildly and hit the dwarf in the chest. Thorm crumpled at the monster's feet, but he still breathed. He tried to crawl out of the way, but the troll reared back for another strike.

"Time to play," Ashok repeated in a whisper. He leaned forward across the stallion's neck. His fingers found the enchanted necklace that bound the nightmare's essence, the spurs buried securely in his flesh. Ashok curled his fingers around the binding and ripped it off.

A scream so loud that it shook the ruined structures echoed through the camp. The trolls and the warriors fighting them all stopped at once and went to their knees in a vast wave. Ashok felt scorching heat surround him, as intense as if he stood in the middle of a forge. Fire erupted from the nightmare's mane, tail, and fetlocks. For a breath, Ashok thought the stallion intended to burn him alive as retribution for his confinement. But as quickly as they appeared, the fires where Ashok sat banked and cooled, burning with a low blue radiance.

With the troll in front of him distracted, Thorm was able to crawl for cover in the ruins. He gazed out at the nightmare in openmouthed horror. Ashok guided the stallion forward to face the troll. The nightmare needed no urging. Ashok let the end of his chain dangle just above the ground.

"Time to burn," he said.

The troll swung its maul at the nightmare. The stallion lunged aside with a speed that had the troll overbalanced and its flank exposed. Turning, the nightmare slammed his burning body into the troll, almost crushing Ashok's right leg. Ashok jumped up and stood on the nightmare's back. He wrapped his chain around the troll's neck and jerked its head to the side. The troll thrashed and tried to pull away, but its flesh burned. A putrid stench filled the air.

The nightmare screamed again and drove his body harder into the troll's flesh. Ashok sawed back and forth with his

chain, while the nightmare's fire licked up his leg and blistered his skin.

The troll finally wrenched free and dragged Ashok off the nightmare's back. He held on to the troll by the chain and used the weapon to pull himself up the monster's back. The troll dropped its maul and swiped furiously at Ashok with its claws. Ashok swung back and forth like a pendulum to dodge the blows, but he slipped and caught a slash to his cheek just below the eye.

Meanwhile, the nightmare cantered back and, without Ashok on his back, poured forth the full fire of his body. The troll staggered back from the heat, and Ashok let go of his chain and dropped to the ground.

The cut on his cheek was deep; he felt the blood running down his neck to pool between his armor and shirt. There was not as much pain as he expected. Empty-handed, Ashok faced the troll as the monster turned to flee from the burning nightmare. The troll charged him, intent on running him down, but Ashok slid on his back feet first in the snow and grabbed one of the troll's thick legs. The monster stumbled but didn't stop. It dragged Ashok along the ground as it tried to make an escape.

The nightmare took his time in pursuit. He knew his prey would not get away. Another breath, and Ashok let go of the monster's leg. The nightmare charged, leaping over Ashok, a living fireball that slammed into the troll's body again and knocked it to the ground. The stallion tore into its flesh with his teeth, then reared and smashed his burning hooves into the troll's flesh until the creature was also a ball of flame.

As the troll perished, the nightmare's flames diminished until Ashok was able to approach it to mount. The nightmare swung his head to face Ashok, his nostrils flaring.

He smells my blood, Ashok thought. Even now, he's hungry for more.

Ashok leaned in and touched his forehead to the stallion's nose, tempting him to snap, testing his own restraint and

the nightmare's. The stallion's lips pulled back to reveal teeth stained with troll blood. Foul breath caressed his face, and Ashok again found himself on the edge of oblivion. His own breaths were quick and shallow. They burned in his chest. His body trembled with the urge to pull away from death—or embrace it.

Alive again in the moment, Ashok thought—so alive, though it may kill me.

Screams drew Ashok out of his stupor. He remembered himself, and more importantly, he remembered Skagi, Cree, and Ilvani. The caravan had brought down another of the trolls, but two others hemmed them in.

He gathered his chain, mounted the nightmare, and dug his heels into the stallion's sides. The nightmare took off, galloping wildly through the ruins amid torchlight and screams. They came within sight of the second troll corpse, a misshapen, burning lump in the snow. Kaibeth and two of the human warriors fed the flames with their torches to make sure the troll wouldn't rise again. Beyond them, Ashok saw more fires, but these did not come from torches or troll corpses.

Ilvani walked through the camp with Skagi and Cree in front and behind her. Yellow flame wreathed her hands. The trio approached the other two trolls at the edge of the ruins. Ilvani made a gesture, and the flames in her hands went out. She shouted words that Ashok didn't understand, and suddenly Cree's katars burst into flame. Skagi's falchion glowed red at the hilt. The radiance spread up the blade and erupted into fire. The brothers raised their newly enchanted weapons and charged the trolls, screaming.

Ashok angled the nightmare to their left to come in at the second troll's flank. Ilvani turned toward him and saw the nightmare's flame from a distance. The firelight reflected in her black eyes. She lifted her arms. Ashok understood what she meant to do and ripped his chain off his belt.



The end fell to the ground, and the spikes burst into purple flame. Ashok ground his heels into the nightmare's flanks to keep the stallion from slamming into the troll this time. He swung the chain over his head and struck the troll as the nightmare charged past. The spikes, enhanced by the smith's magic and Ilvani's fire, sliced through the monster's tough hide and took half its arm away. The purple flames crawled along its skin, and the troll screamed and clutched its maimed appendage.

Out in the darkness beyond the camp, Ashok wheeled the nightmare around for another charge. From this vantage, he saw Vlahna and Tuva fighting the other troll with the rest of the human guards. Vlahna guided her horse with her knees and fired an arrow. It burst into purple flame before it struck the other troll in the eye. She dismounted and, with the spiked chain still wrapped around her arm, followed up the arrow shot with a vicious swipe to the creature's back.

One after another, her attacks weakened the troll, but despite these successes, Ashok sensed something was off in her body language. She hacked at the thing in desperation and placed her body in front of Tuva whenever possible. Finally, the big warrior pushed her roughly aside and charged in to strike his own blow against the troll. When he did, Ashok saw the cause of Vlahna's desperation.

Tuva had no visible wound, but he limped and swung his weapon stiffly, half-frozen from the troll's aura. Not only did he present an appealingly large target, but he also stood too close to the monster to escape a blow in his wounded state. Vlahna tried in vain to protect him.

The creature swung a spiked club wildly and hit Tuva. The blow plucked the shadar-kai off his feet and threw him into one of the fires. He rolled away but stumbled trying to get back up. Ashok saw him vomit blood onto the snow.

Vlahna screamed in fury and hacked into the troll again. She used the spikes to lever herself up the monster's back.

She climbed and hacked until the troll collapsed to its knees from the pain.

Ashok spurred the nightmare forward for another charge. The purple fire made his chain painful to hold, but Ashok reveled in the gift. He came at the other troll from behind, snapping the chain up and then straight down. The spikes raked up and down the troll's back, leaving a line of purple fire. The monster went down and took another fiery arrow to its neck. Its flesh bristled with them, and the fires spread. The warriors converged on the maddened trolls in close combat, hacking and dodging the wild blows from their clubs and claws.

It was over quickly after that. Even in their maddened state, the trolls couldn't stand against their superior numbers, and soon there were four immense bonfires burning in the ruins.

Five, Ashok corrected. Now that the immediate danger was past, the caravan crewmembers turned their attention to the other menace in their midst. The warriors, shadar-kai and human alike, surrounded Ashok and the nightmare, but they kept a safe distance between themselves and the beast's flaming hooves. For his part, the nightmare stomped the ground and shook his head back and forth in barely checked fury.

"Don't come any closer," Ashok advised the crew. "He'll snap at you if you do." The warriors must have sensed a threat in his words, for he heard swords slide from scabbards.

Skagi, Cree, and Ilvani worked their way through the crowd. On the ground, Vlahna and Kaibeth helped Tuva, who looked badly wounded.

"Where is a cleric?" Ashok said. He ignored the threat from the crowd. "Tuva needs healing."

" 'Tuva' ... needs ... an explanation." The warrior leaned on the two women for support. Blood coated his lips and chin. "What have you brought us, Ashok?"

"You know what he is," Ashok said. "I'll wager you've brought them in from the Shadowfell plain yourself on caravan runs."

"But to hide it among us all this time," one of the human guards said, "you must be mad."

"The beast has been under an enchantment until now," Ashok said. "The magic keeps its essence contained. By the will of Neimal, the Sworn of the Wall, its powers couldn't have harmed you."

"Why weren't we told?" Vlahna demanded. "If Neimal permitted this, there must have been a reason."

Ashok started to speak and was shocked to hear Ilvani's voice echo over the crowd.

"For your protection," the witch said. She glanced at the troll pyres. "The monsters were drawn here." She dropped her voice. "More will come."

Uneasy murmurs drifted through the crowd. "More trolls?" Tatigan asked, stepping as close as he dared to the nightmare so he could address Ashok.

"Maybe—we can't be sure," Ashok said. "Some force is driving the creatures of the Shadowfell mad, sending them into killing rages, just like what we witnessed that day on the plain," he said, looking at Tuva and Vlahna. "We thought the madness didn't extend to the creatures of this world—"

"You were wrong," Vlahna said flatly. "You should have warned us."

"I know," Ashok said, "but we didn't think it would be necessary. By the strength of its will, the nightmare has been able to shake off the affliction, so I brought it along in secret to protect the caravan. We intend to seek the counsel of the witches in Rashemen to find out why all this is happening."

He met Skagi's and Cree's gazes in the crowd. He did not mention the other reason they'd kept silent, the part Ilvani's dreams played in triggering the killing sprees. If they knew,

there was every possibility Vertan would have a dagger at the witch's throat again.

And Ashok would have to kill him.

"So in the meantime, we're stuck out here in the middle of winter with our numbers diminished and half our wagons and horses either dead or damaged," Tatigan said. "Tomorrow we start up into the mountains, so the worst is yet to come."

"At least we'll be traveling light," Kaibeth murmured. Tuva shot her a quelling glance, but she ignored him. "The witch is right," she said. "When the monsters come, better we have the protection of bigger monsters."

"And what a monster we have," Daruk, standing closer than all the others in the crowd, remarked. He lifted his hand in the air as if tasting the nightmare's aura. "This is more than I could have hoped for. There's a song in this, make no mistake."

The guards scoffed, but they had relaxed their grip on their weapons. The nightmare snuffed out a breath and danced in place, but Ashok didn't think the stallion would lash out.

"You'll have to keep it well away from the other beasts," Vlahna told him. "It'll slow our pace to nothing if the horses have to labor under the strain of that thing's presence."

"Done," Ashok said. He looked at Tuva, who was sweating, his body trembling with the effort of standing upright, even with Vlahna and Kaibeth's assistance. "You need a cleric," he repeated.

Tuva grinned, exposing bloodstained teeth. "The clerics are dead," he said. "We'll all have to settle for bandages and bed rest from here until we get to Rashemen."

"We'll never make it," said one of the older drovers. He was a tall, white-bearded, gangly human with a crooked nose. "Not through the mountains, not if we have to endure another rush attack like this one."

Tatigan looked at the old drover. "You've been on enough runs to know, Baelthis. What say you to that?" he asked Tuva.

"I still say we were running too heavy to begin with," Kaibeth broke in. "We scrape off all the excess—wagons, dead horses, extra gear—keep the bare essentials, and we'll glide through the mountains smoother than we would have if we were carrying all that fat you humans thought you couldn't live without."

The drovers were indignant, and Tuva snarled, "You keep those thoughts to yourself, Bl—" He caught himself, but Kaibeth stiffened, and new tension suffused the camp as her warriors automatically took a step closer to their leader. Ashok thought Kaibeth would throw off Tuva's arm, but she kept her anger in check.

"No, she's right, Tuva," Vlahna spoke up, which silenced them all. "The leaner we are, the better chance we have of getting through the mountains with minimal losses. Tatigan, I know your crew doesn't want to hear it, but you're all too much concerned with comfort. If we're going to do this right, we have to do it our way."

"So we're a shadar-kai caravan now, are we?" Daruk said. He scratched at his chin. "Interesting how the power balance subtly shifts."

Disgruntled murmurs of agreement ran through the crowd, especially among the drovers. Ashok silently cursed the bard. He seemed to enjoy nothing more than spreading dissent, even if it ended up getting them all killed.

The Martucks worked their way to the front of the crowd to stand beside Tatigan. The woman kept close by the boy, Les. They all carried torches.

"What say you in all this, Martuck?" Tatigan said. "You have an equal stake in this to lose." He addressed the family as a whole. It struck Ashok as odd. He expected it to mean they'd hear three different voices and opinions, which would

be no more helpful than Daruk, but the man and woman exchanged a glance, and the woman nodded.

"We're willing to go on with you," the man said. "We've come too far to turn back without great loss. And we're willing to trim down our gear if that's what it takes."

Tatigan nodded. "What says Thorm, then?" he asked. He scanned the crowd to try to pick out the dwarf.

"Thorm is gone," Ashok spoke up.

"Dead?" Tatigan asked.

"Not last I saw him," Ashok said. "More likely he's fled to join the brigands."

"He's the traitor?" Tatigan's composure, thus far carefully maintained, broke at last. He cursed violently and hurled the torch in his hands to the ground. The brand guttered and died in the snow. The eyes of the crowd were drawn to the hissing and the smoke.

"He fooled us all," the Martuck woman said. "We all agreed he'd be our third partner, Tatigan. We trusted him too."

"I know it, Leesal, but he was my choice. I brought him to you." Tatigan rubbed his eyes in weariness and looked up at Ashok. "Brigands too," he said. "What else could we be facing?"

"Winter wolves," Cree said. "We're in their territory now. Probably only the trolls' presence has scared them off up to now. They'll be coming at us. Before they might have been content to pick off stragglers, but if they're afflicted by the madness, there's no telling what they'll do."

"We have to assume they'll attack and fight until they're all dead," Tuva said, "just like the others."

"Brigands, wolves, trolls—like I told you," Baelthis, the old drover, said, "we can't make it."

"We can if we plan it right," Ashok said. "We have no clerics, but we have capable warriors, magic"—he pointed at Ilvani—"and a monster, as Kaibeth said. But our best advantage is that we know what we're facing."

“What about the mountains?” Baelthis said. “There are dangers enough up there to kill us all without the monsters’ help. Crevasses to bury whole wagons, avalanches, storms —”

“And the spirits,” Ilvani said. “The spirits of Rashemen claim that land. We walk in their footsteps.”

“The monsters and the brigands will face those same dangers if they follow us,” Vlahna said.

“Which means we can use them,” Tuva said. A fit of violent coughing overtook him then, and he spat more blood on the snow. Kaibeth and Vlahna exchanged grim looks.

Skagi came forward and spread his cloak on a clear patch near the ruins of a stone hut. “Put him down here. He needs to take the weight off his feet so he can breathe.”

“I’m fine,” Tuva barked. “Gods, I haven’t been this clearheaded in a tenday.” But he allowed the women to lower him to the makeshift bed.

“We’ll need that clearheadedness to make a plan of attack,” Vlahna said. “Drovers, you’ll come with me to collect the gear and get the wagons in order. Guards, collect the horses. You know what to do with the injured beasts.” She looked at Kaibeth. “Will you help me?”

Kaibeth nodded. She instructed her sellswords to help with the wounded. Skagi, Cree, and Ilvani went with them.

The crowd slowly dispersed. Each had their task to focus on, so that fear would not overtake them. Tatigan motioned to Ashok. Ashok got down off the nightmare’s back and went to where he, Daruk, and the Martucks stood near Tuva’s pallet. Mareyn shadowed the boy and kept watch. She still clutched her ribs from where she’d hit the stones, but she walked steadily and looked clear-eyed. They all looked uneasy at seeing the nightmare so close among them. The stallion’s aura of fear and evil was impossible to ignore, but no one remarked on it so long as the beast kept silent.

“Baelthis isn’t a coward,” Tatigan said. “If he says our chances are bad, he means it. You three need to devise a

strategy to get us through the mountains.” He pointed at Ashok, Tuva, and Daruk. Ashok was surprised to find the bard included in the group.

The bard caught Ashok’s look and smiled. “Don’t worry, fire bringer. I may not be shadar-kai, but I know how to compose a play. You all get to be my actors.”

“I could make a jest about this turning from a farce to a tragedy,” Mareyn said dryly, “but I won’t.”

Tatigan and the Martucks chuckled, which eased a bit of the tension.

“Let’s get to work, then,” Tuva said. “However the story ends, it begins at first light.”



They reached the foothills of the Sunrise Mountains by midday. The snow held off for most of the morning, though the clouds were heavy and ominous the whole way. When they reached the last stone marker before the mountain pass, thick flakes began to fall, but the hills gave them a respite from the wind. The going was slow enough, but not impossible.

Ashok trailed behind the caravan, keeping only Skagi and Cree in sight ahead of him. The brothers rode their horses back as close as they dared every hour or so to check on him. They worried he would lose sight of the caravan and risk fading in the blank whiteness, but Ashok’s senses were alert.

The deeper they forged into the mountains, the higher the rock walls. There were many places for an ambush, many cracks and crevices for enemies to hide. They were walking into the mouth of the beast, and all of them knew it. Ashok was ready.

Cree rode back to him an hour later. “See anything?” he asked.

Ashok shook his head. “It will come soon,” he said.



"I feel it too," Cree said. "Skagi's about to jump out of his skin."

"And Ilvani?"

Cree's brow furrowed. Ashok felt a surge of trepidation.

"She doesn't look well," Cree said. "She tried to sleep earlier, but she's having dreams, bad ones. I asked her about them, but she's not making sense. Skagi thinks it might be the nightmare tormenting her—revenge for what happened out on the plain. What do you think?"

"It's the spirits," Ashok said. "Whatever got into her head before is back again, and it's drawing in all the monsters." He clenched his hands into fists. "We should have turned away from Rashemen before we got too deep in the spirit land. She was fine when it was only this world she had to worry about."

Cree listened, but Ashok could tell the warrior didn't fully understand. Neither did Ashok. He wasn't convinced the witches would understand Ilvani's affliction, either, or choose to help someone who wasn't one of their own people, but now it was their only choice.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**A**AGNY HAS ARRIVED," REINA SAID.

"I know." Standing with her back to the healer, Sree gazed across the lake. She felt the presence of the other hathran as she felt the movement of the water. She buried her face in her cloak hood for a breath to warm her skin.

"Shall I fetch Elina?" the ethran asked.

"Yes, but don't tell her anything. I don't want to frighten her."

When Sree turned, she saw Agny dismount at the inn. A stable boy immediately came out, bowed to the hathran, and took charge of her horse. The woman patted his shoulder.

Agny was on the grayer side of fifty winters, with leathery hands and a mask carved with symbols of water: hands cupping it, rain falling from the sky, a water spirit crouching by her left eye. She wore a gray and red wool dress, frayed and muddied around the edges from travel. The hathran walked stiff-jointed and carried a gnarled wood staff whose power Sree could feel even from this distance.

"Well met, Sister." Sree held out her hands, and Agny clasped them tightly. Her eyes behind the mask were unreadable, but Sree sensed affection in the old woman's grip.

"You look as if you've seen dark days," Agny said. Her voice rang out clipped and strong. Age and toil had not dulled her mind, not even a bit.

"You feel it, don't you?" Sree said. "The telthors are shaking the earth."

"I feel the fear in the villagers, as well. That boy was drowning in it. You must not let this continue," Agny chided. "Come." She folded Sree's arm through her own, and together they walked beside the lake. "If the spirits are

displeased, we must act to set right whatever wrong called forth their ire. It's the only way you will find peace in Tinnir again."

"What of the child?" Sree asked. "She is innocent in all this, yet the disturbances seem to happen whenever she is near. What if the spirits hurt her?"

"They will not. I'm sure of that. She is the vessel," Agny said. "The spirits are angry that Yaraella took her own life. They punish us, they *remind* us, by surrounding her child with violence."

"They should punish me," Sree said. "I failed Yaraella by not teaching her properly. If I had done my duty, she would have embraced the path of the wychlaran instead of shunning her talents. She would have become a powerful hathran, a link to the spirits—"

"Do not torment yourself with things that can never be," Agny said. "You honor Yaraella's memory by protecting her child. We must look to the child now to guide us. Tell me, where is she now?"

"Reina is bringing her here," Sree said. "She is calmest by the lake."

Agny's sharp eyes bored into Sree. "Now I hear the fear in your voice, Sister. What are you not telling me? What is the child like when she is *not* calm?"

Sree dropped her gaze. "Yesterday at dawn I caught her with a knife. She'd cut herself up and down her arms. I got to her before she did irreparable harm, but it could have been much worse. When I asked her why she'd done it ..."

"Yes?" Agny prompted. "Did the spirits speak to her? I cannot believe they would have told her to do this to herself —"

"No," Sree said. "No, it wasn't the spirits, Elina said. She said it was the shadow people."

"Shadow people?" Agny said. "But if she wasn't speaking of spirits, what manner of creature did she see?" Agny

stiffened, as if she'd felt a shift in the wind. She turned. "Never mind. I'll ask her myself."

Reina walked toward them. She led Elina by the hand. The child stepped clumsily, trying to put her own small feet in the footprints left in the snow by Sree and Agny. Sree hung back as Agny approached the child and went down on her knees in the snow. She laid her staff on the ground beside her and held out her arms to the child, just as she'd done to Sree.

Elina froze with one foot held in the air. She stumbled, and only Reina's hands kept her from falling. When the ethran tried to nudge her forward, the child clung to her skirt and hid her face from Agny.

"Don't be afraid, Elina," the hathran said. Her voice was gentle. "I was a friend to your mother. I knew her when she was your age." She reached inside the pocket of her skirt and pulled out a fist-sized wooden box with blue waves painted on the outside. "She made this box for me."

Hearing the word "box," Elina turned her face to look. Her hair hung down in her eyes, but she followed Agny's movements as the hathran lifted the box lid to reveal a tiny painting of a waterfall that spilled from the lid to the bottom of the box in a cloud of white foam.

"She painted this for me, so I would always remember the waterfalls I saw on my *dajemma*. It was the only journey I ever made beyond Rashemen." She closed the lid and held out the box. "I think your mother would want you to have it. It would make me happy to give it to you."

Tentatively—though Sree could see the desire in her eyes—the child took a step away from Reina, then another and another until she was just within reach of the box. She reached up her hand and took it, her fingers barely brushing the hathran's.

It was enough. Sree watched Agny's eyes widen. She wondered what the old woman had sensed from the contact, but she dared not question her in front of the child. Elina

took the box and walked up to Sree with her arms outstretched. Sree obligingly picked her up.

“Elina,” she said, “Agy has come a long way to visit us. She wants to know more about what happened the day you fell asleep behind the woodpile.”

The child shook her head fiercely, but Agny laid a hand on her arm. “I won’t make you speak of it, little one. All I want is for you and I, and Reina and Sree—the four of us—to join together to think of your mother and the spirits. We will remember her and comfort one another. Will you join me in this, Elina?”

Elina hesitated and glanced at Sree. Sree nodded encouragement and patted her on the back. The little girl finally nodded and then shyly buried her face in Sree’s neck.

“My deepest thanks, Elina. You are a brave girl,” Agny said. The hathran looked to Sree, and her expression turned resolute. “Will you take me to Yaraella’s resting place?”

“I thought it best if we communed here,” Sree said, gesturing to the lake. “I’ve a boat prepared for our use, so that you may be on the water during the joining.”

Agny looked surprised. “But surely, Sister, the connection will be strongest around Yaraella. That is the place the spirits will gather.”

“It may,” Sree allowed. She hated to speak of this in front of Elina, but Agny’s sharp eyes looked expectantly to her for an answer. “But we already have a strong center for this joining”—she hoped Agny would take her meaning without her having to frighten Elina by referring to her as a pawn in a ritual—“and to add the sacred ground of Yaraella’s spirit to this. I fear the power might be too much for some of us.”

“Very well,” Agny said. “I defer to your judgment in this, Sister. Lead on.”

Sree breathed a silent sigh of relief. Carrying Elina, she led the witches down the lakeshore to a small dock. Moored to one of the pilings was a boat, the bow carved with symbols of mountain peaks and flames. It was an odd grouping, when

seen in that light: fire, mountain, water. But just as the symbols also represented hearth and home to Sree, so, too, did the water represent home to Agny. She'd been born on this lake and rocked to her first sleep by the motion of a fisherman's felucca. No matter how frigid the waters became in the deep winter, Agny would rather swim than walk; she would rather be on a boat than on land. Sree often thought the water spirits had helped bring Agny into the world that long-ago day on the ship. Now they claimed part of her soul.

Agny stepped onto the boat first, then Sree and the child. Reina untied the mooring rope, and the four of them settled down on wooden plank benches. Agny closed her eyes and touched her mask with both hands. The wind lifted her gray hair. Sree breathed in deeply and caught the scent of Agny's magic surrounding the boat. It nudged the craft away from the dock and pushed it toward the middle of the lake.

The few other craft they encountered gave way immediately when the fishermen saw the two hathrans. They bowed their heads as the witches drifted silently past.

It was colder out here where there was nothing to stop the wind. Sree held Elina close so the child could share her body heat, but Elina did not shiver. She didn't speak either. Her unnatural silence had always troubled Sree. What feelings might she be concealing?

She had not spoken about the incident with the sheep and the stillborn child. Sree knew there was some malignant force at work, a force strong enough to kill. If Elina knew what it was, she wasn't telling, and her silence struck Sree with fear.

The boat stopped within sight of the shore. Agny's power wrapped around the craft and sent up restless jets of water. A wet, frigid breeze blew in Sree's face, but her mask shielded her from the worst of the cold. Behind her, Reina pulled her cloak close around herself and moved so that they were sitting in a loose circle with Elina in the center. Sree joined hands with Agny and Reina. Agny's flesh was

warm despite the frigid air—a measure of her great power and connection to the lake and its spirits.

Elina sat quietly within their circle, watching each of the witches. The ethran closed her eyes and dropped into a meditative state. The healer's place was to support, not direct, the ritual. Sree understood that support would be her task as well. She was also a hathran, equal in the ranks of the wychlaran to Agny, but Agny had been born here, in Tinnir, on the same waters that were the village's lifeblood. Sree had not lived here as long. She was a teacher; she went where her sisters needed her to help other potential witches embrace their powers.

Until her failure with Yaraella, Sree had considered herself a very good teacher.

Sree tried to put these thoughts from her mind. Self-doubt had no place here in this circle. They gathered now for Elina, and for the people of the village who looked to them for guidance and protection. For their sake, she must not waver.

Sree closed her eyes and cleared her mind. She felt Agny's power rise up over the sides of the boat and envelop them. Suddenly she was warm, very warm. Her skin tingled with renewed vitality. She felt her cloak, her dress, and Elina's small, cold hands gripping her skirt. Every sensation heightened, until Sree gasped with the force of it.

What was this experience? She could hear her heartbeat, long, slow thuds that moved the blood in hot strokes through her veins.

"We feel you, spirits." Agny's breath sounded as labored as Sree's own. Reina gripped her hand and uttered a soft whimper. "We are one with you. Tell us your will. We ask you to speak to us on behalf of this child, who is in our hearts and minds. Look into her soul, and tell us why this evil force haunts her. Spirits, tell us why on behalf of her mother, Yaraella, who departed from us by her own hand. Will you protect Yaraella's child? Will you show us the way to earn forgiveness for our sins?"

The vision broke over Sree in a rush. She heard Reina's sharp cry, and Agny abruptly stopped speaking. Distantly, Sree became aware that Elina had crawled into her lap and held her tightly around the waist, but these details were secondary to what she was seeing in her inner reality.

Four figures—three men and a woman by their shapes—stood on a mountain. More than that Sree couldn't make out. The vision came at the four from a wide, soaring angle, like a bird diving down to capture prey. Were they telthors? Or perhaps Sree and her sisters rode on the wings of the spirits to a place the telthors wanted them to see. Sree waited impatiently for the vision to resolve itself.

As they flew closer, Sree realized that her heartbeat, the surge in her blood intensified. She felt as if her veins were on fire. Was this an attack from the four? She saw them plainly now. They had the faces and forms of humans, but their skin was the color of ashes, and their eyes were flat black, with no whites or color visible. One of them was missing an eye, and they were all terribly scarred—their spirits as well as their flesh. Inky black shadows surrounded the four of them, though the biggest concentration seemed to center on a man with long, matted gray hair. He carried a spiked chain in his hand and guided the others.

Sree turned her gaze to the woman. She wanted to memorize all the faces before the vision soared past the four figures. Her skin and eyes were exactly like the others, but she had pale red hair and a skeletal slenderness that made Sree think she would break in a harsh wind. She seemed unafraid of the mountain, the howling wind, or the blowing snow that filled the air.

The mountain—Sree hadn't realized it until now, but she knew the mountains in the vision. Of course she did. The symbols carved on her mask were imitations of those majestic peaks, the Sunrise Mountains.

They were close to Rashemen's border. Surely, they could have nothing to do with Elina or the disturbances in the



village. Yet why would the spirits show them this unless they were important? Unless they were a threat?

Sree started to shift her gaze to the other two men, when suddenly the woman turned and looked directly at her. Sree was so shocked, she almost pulled back and lost the connection to her sisters. She told herself it was just a coincidence—there was no way the woman could see them, not when the vision existed by the spirits' will—but the way the woman's piercing black eyes seemed to bore into Sree was deeply unsettling. Then, the woman raised her hand and made a shooing motion toward Sree.

"Go away," she said. The rebuke, a tangible force, penetrated the worlds and rang fiercely in Sree's ears. The hathran cried out in surprise and pain, and the vision dissolved into a black abyss into which she was falling, falling....

Sree opened her eyes and found herself back on the boat. She stared at her sisters. Reina's eyes were shocked, Elina had her face buried in Sree's lap, and Agny ... Sree couldn't see the witch's face behind her mask, but her eyes were cold. It was a frightening sight, and for a moment, Sree was afraid the hathran's ire was aimed at her.

After a breath, Agny seemed to regain control of herself. She closed her eyes and opened them again. The boat began to move, angling back toward the dock. Agny breathed deeply before she spoke.

"Reina," she said quietly, "once we're on shore, I want you to speak to Slengolt and his fang. They're to put on extra guards to secure our borders. Tell them what you saw in our vision. If these strangers come to Tinnir, they're to be brought to me immediately."

Reina nodded. Her large eyes were the only indication of her unease. Sree addressed Agny. "What does this mean, Sister? The spirits are rarely silent—"

"They were not silent," Agny said. "The spirits showed us that these strangers are at the center of what's happening in

the village. Now we must find out how and why.”

“We don’t even know what sort of creatures we face,” Reina said. “Did you see their eyes?”

Agy looked at the young ethran. “I did, and I know what they are—the soulless ones. You saw the shadows clinging to them, Reina?”

The ethran shivered and nodded. “Shadows that looked alive.”

“They are shadar-kai, a race spawned from the empire of Netheril. I’ve seen them on the caravan trails, though I’ve never spoken to one to know its mind. Outlanders tell stories of their frenzied nature. They lose themselves in battle and fight with a ferocity that makes others fear them.”

“Like the berserkers,” Reina said.

“No,” Agy said sharply. “Our warriors fight to protect their families and their homes. There is honor in every strike of their blades, for the sacrifices they make in battle strengthen us all. For the shadar-kai, fighting is merely an excuse to lose themselves to pain and death, to revel in suffering until their bodies are scarred husks.”

“But why?” Reina asked. “Why inflict such torment on themselves?”

“Because their souls are made of shadow,” Agy said, “or so the tales claim. Pain and suffering are the only forces strong enough to anchor their essences to this world. They suffer in order that they may live.”

“What kind of life is that?” Reina said. She reached out to stroke Elina’s hair. The child had fallen asleep in Sree’s lap. “Better to end one’s own life than live to do such damage to one’s self and others.”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Sree said, speaking for the first time. “To throw away that spark inside of us—to kill—takes a coldness and resolve that perhaps even these shadar-kai do not possess.”

“Perhaps you’re right, Sister.” Reina’s voice was sad. She didn’t say what she was thinking, but Sree knew. She was

remembering Yaraella and the ivory-handled knife  
protruding from her stomach.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AS THE CARAVAN PASSED THE FIRST TRAIL MARKER IN THE mountains, the wolves descended.

Cree had been tracking them all that morning. Their movements suggested they were mustering, gathering their pack as fast as they could for the ambush. Under normal circumstances, the beasts would never have been so bold and careless, but Ashok wasn't surprised they were behaving erratically. The pack was in the grip of the same unnatural madness that had affected the trolls, drawn by Ilvani's dream visions to the caravan. The entire crew was alert, ready to put in motion the plan Ashok, Daruk, and Tuva had concocted. They were as prepared as they were going to be to weather the storm.

Ashok knew the moment the nightmare sensed the wolves' presence. The stallion's whole body quivered, muscles straining to attack, but Ashok held him in check. His biggest fear was not that the nightmare would surge forward prematurely but that he would utter the cry that sent the caravan into chaos.

"Keep the beast silent," Vlahna had told him before they started into the mountains, "or I'll put an arrow in its throat."

Ashok touched the nightmare's mane, running his fingers through the warm black strands in a calming gesture.

"If you scream now, everything is lost." He leaned forward to whisper in the stallion's ear. "You know what I want from you—fire and speed. Give me those, and you will have your wolf blood. You'll feast on their carcasses."

The nightmare snorted, and once again, the words may not have been there, but the emotions passed between them like shouts. The nightmare would not cry out. He would hold himself in check.

The wolves reached the trail ahead of them. A high-pitched whistle rent the air, and at the signal, the drovers

dropped flat to their bellies on the backs of the wagon horses. Guards rose up behind them in the wagons and let loose with crossbow bolts. Some of them missed, but enough hit that the wolves pulled back from their initial charge and spread out to get at their flanks.

The horses saw the wolves and went wild. Draped over their backs, the drovers kept the wagon horses from bolting, but there were screams and chaos all through the line. They'd expected that—it was the drovers' and passengers' job to keep them in check while the warriors fought.

Tuva, still wounded, fired a crossbow from the back of Ilvani's wagon. Daruk was there also. He had his eyes closed—Ashok hoped he was preparing a spell, but he thought it just as likely the bard was meditating as if before a performance.

Restless, the nightmare stomped his hooves and uttered a sound deep in his throat that sounded very much like a growl.

"Almost," Ashok said. The wolves ran along the line in pairs. The crossbow bolts wouldn't keep them at bay for very much longer. They were too far gone for caution. At this distance, Ashok couldn't see their eyes, but he knew by the way they moved—with little grace and no thought of protecting their bodies from the crossbow quarrels—the madness gripped them fully.

Ahead of him, Cree and Skagi abandoned their horses to the Martuck woman, Leesal, who dragged them behind a group of the rear wagons that had clustered together for defense. Mareyn covered her.

"Come on, Daruk, damn you," Ashok muttered.

Finally, the bard opened his eyes and stood up. He jumped over the side of the wagon and landed in a crouch. From his belt, he drew a slender black wand. Unornamented, the item nevertheless glowed with shadowy radiance. Daruk raised it above his head and brought its end down against the

ground. At the same instant, he sang a single low note that echoed throughout the pass.

“Time for the show!” Daruk cried. He threw his head back and laughed—a dark sound that echoed like music. “Goddess, take them into your arms and show them what the shadow truly is!”

Black energy rippled over the ground like smoke, encircling the camp. Ashok felt a tremor go through his body when the shadows touched him. Strength filled him, a power that made his heart stumble in his chest. He was suddenly cold, colder than he’d ever been, but it was not the debilitating feeling he’d had on the trail. His mind was clear. He saw his enemies before him, and he knew he could crush them singlehandedly if he had to. The power was intoxicating. It filled him up and, when he could no longer take it in, Ashok knew he had to release it or he would die.

He must kill.

The nightmare’s flame ripped to life. The stallion felt the power too. It had claimed them both.

“Go,” Ashok whispered hoarsely, and the nightmare charged.

He rode alongside the caravan, his chain unfurled at his side to strike out at the first pair of wolves that tried to jump at the wagons. The nightmare’s flame warned one of them off, but the other leaped and blindly grabbed hold of Ashok’s chain with its teeth. It shook its head back and forth and tried to tear the weapon out of his grip, but Ashok held on and mangled the side of the monster’s jaw. The wolf hissed, and its icy breath caught Ashok in the arm. Steam rose in the air as fire met frost. The wolf put its massive paws against the nightmare’s flank to try to off balance the stallion, but the nightmare’s fire scalded hotter than it could stand. Yelping, it fell away.

Frost stiffened Ashok’s arm. He whipped his chain up into his hand and held it against the nightmare’s mane. The burning pain from heat and cold made him light-headed.

He rode up and down the line, using the fire to drive the wolves back while the humans and Kaibeth and her sellswords got into defensive positions beside the wagons. There were too many gaps. The wolves would not be frightened for long.

Ashok slid off the nightmare's back and struck the stallion's flank. The nightmare charged the wolves, his body exploding into flame until only his red eyes were visible. He absorbed a shock of cold from one of the wolves and struck the thing in the face with his hooves. The wolf howled and fell back, the fur around its face blackened. The nightmare pursued.

Ashok turned his attention to the warriors by the wagons. He teleported and reappeared beside Skagi and Cree, who were fighting a wolf with patches of fur missing from the left side of its face.

"We're calling this one Ugly," Skagi shouted as a blast of cold caught the warrior in the legs. Skagi went down, but Cree was there to put himself in front of his brother before the wolf could pounce on him. Skagi teleported a safe distance away to regain the feeling in his legs.

"They're all ugly," Cree said. He sliced at the wolf with his left katar blade and turned the creature's fur red.

Ashok became solid and protected their left flank, letting the wagon guard their right. He gave himself enough space to swing his chain and struck out at the wolves as they darted in at the gaps between the wagons. His arms never seemed to tire. Daruk's energy poured out of him in a ceaseless flood. Was there no end to the spell's power?

"Do you feel that?" Ashok yelled to Cree as the warrior struck down his wolf again. Skagi was on his feet now and slashed at the thing's other side.

"Feel what?" Cree said. He stabbed the wolf in the neck. It did not rise again, but its cold attack stiffened Cree's movements. Ashok saw Cree flex his arms to try to loosen the muscles and coax feeling back into his fingers.

Strangely, Ashok no longer felt the cold in his arm—or anywhere else in his body. He was away from the nightmare, but he was burning with fever.

“The bard’s spell,” Ashok said. “I feel it giving me strength.”

“I felt it for a breath,” Skagi said. “We could use another one like it.”

“Look there,” Cree said, distracting them.

Ashok looked to where Cree pointed and saw Ilvani levitating over the caravan. Her gaze was unfocused, her attention directed behind them.

“That’s not a good sign,” Ashok said. “She sees something.”

“More wolves?” Skagi said. “Let them come. They’re practically hurling themselves on our blades.”

“They’re doing it to hamper our grips,” Ashok said. The wolves weren’t so far gone that they didn’t recognize where the threat came from. If they were too cold to hold their weapons, the warriors had no chance. The beasts could pick them off at will. He could already see their warriors succumbing to the freezing breath of the winter wolves and having their bodies mauled by the packs.

The trio moved to help some of these beleaguered defenders. A wolf yanked one of the drovers off his horse. The animal fell screaming under the weight of another wolf. Ashok held his chain in both hands and teleported, reappearing beside the drover’s wolf to strike with necrotic energy dancing along his chain. He willed the shift again and raked the chain along the body of the wolf attacking the horse. The beast howled and turned to bite Ashok, but he was gone again, teleporting in a dizzying circle among the pack.

Ashok appeared again, panting, finally released of some of the energy from Daruk’s spell. Skagi and Cree covered him while he regained his bearings. The three of them moved



down the caravan in a line of death while giving the crew a much-needed defense against the wolves.

A blast of necrotic energy rained down on the wolves from above. The beasts blew wild breaths of frost and scattered in all directions to avoid the killing shocks. Ashok looked up and saw the black lightning darting between Ilvani's outstretched hands. She caught his eye and pointed to the east.

"They're coming," she said. "Thorm's brigands."

"Come to clean up what's left of us, just like we thought," Cree said.

"Godsdamned cowards." Skagi grunted as a wolf hit him in the shoulder. A blast of cold issued from its mouth and struck him in the face. Stunned, he fell under the weight of the wolf.

Cree dived on top of the beast and wrenched it sideways. It landed in the snow between his body and Skagi's.

Ashok tossed one end of his chain to Cree and fell beside Skagi with the other. They pinned the struggling wolf against the ground with the chain. The spikes dug into its flesh. The more the wolf struggled to get up, the more it mauled itself on the weapon.

It flipped over on its left side and struck out at Ashok's face, teeth snapping wildly. Ashok grabbed its jaw and pushed its head up. Teeth sank into his palm, but the pain only made Ashok grip harder. He held the wolf's head in an immovable grip.

"Skagi!" he cried. He couldn't turn to see how the other warrior fared, or he'd lose his hold on the wolf. "Can you move?"

He heard Skagi curse, but the words came out slurred. The warrior rose up to his knees and plunged his falchion into the wolf's neck. Ashok felt the creature's warm lifeblood coat his fingers. When it went limp, he relaxed his grip on its jaw.

"My fault," Cree said. He threw the end of Ashok's chain back to him. "I didn't see that one coming."

"We're all tired." Skagi dug his fingernails into his cheeks to get the feeling back in his flesh. His words were still slightly garbled. "The brigands are going to hit us just right."

"Not if Daruk's theatrics work," cried a voice.

Mareyn ran up to them. She bled from a shallow wound at her neck, but her eyes were still alight with the excitement of the battle. She offered Ashok a hand to get up. When he clasped her forearm, he left a bloody stain.

"Well, you've been busy." She wiped the blood in the snow. "Is it time to move the caravan along?"

"Yes," Ashok said. "Tell the others. We don't want the brigands slamming into us from behind while we're at a standstill. If that happens, we'll be eaten up from both directions."

"Stay alive then, until I return," Mareyn said. She ran back up the caravan and signaled to the drovers.

Ilvani descended into the back of the wagon nearest Ashok and the brothers. Ashok heard the bard's voice echoing down the line. He trotted up to Ilvani's wagon, wand in hand. He held out his other hand to the witch.

"Ready for the finale, my lady?" he said, eyes gleaming.

Ilvani ignored his hand and jumped down from the wagon. "Make sure the others feel your song next time," she said. Her eyes narrowed. "All the others."

Daruk's smile stayed in place, but it looked strained. "After you, my lady," he said.

"Wait," Ashok said. He went to Ilvani. The brothers fell back to cover the wagons until they got moving. "Watch him," he whispered to Ilvani.

The witch nodded. "He's safer with me than with you," she said. She turned away, and Ashok hurried to help the others.

For the first time since he'd released it, he looked for the nightmare. Wreathed in red flame, the stallion wasn't hard to spot at the head of the caravan. The wolves, many of them severely injured by the caravan crew, tripped over one

another to get out of the path of fire, but the nightmare ran them down.

Ashok felt the longing to join in the chase. That strange, pounding darkness from Daruk's spell lingered in his body, calling to him like the last notes of a song. He found it hard to resist.

A scream rent the air, pulling Ashok out of his stupor. He recognized Mareyn's voice and ran toward the front wagons. He saw a pair of female wolves amid a whirling vortex of snow and ice that towered over the caravan. The vortex solidified into the largest wolf Ashok had yet seen. Its pelt was heavy with ice crystals, and its eyes shone a strange crystalline blue. A thick cloud of frost blew from its mouth and filled the air around where the wolves stood.

"Snowfang!" someone cried from the wagons.

Ashok looked for Mareyn, but he didn't see her. The pair of smaller females dragged a body by the foot away from the caravan. Ashok broke into a run, but the snowfang was in his way. The larger wolf released another breath, and suddenly the air was the air of the fiercest winter storm. It blinded Ashok and everyone around him. He heard their cries and fumbling as they went down.

Behind them, the rear guard cried out that the brigands were coming fast. They would be upon them if the wagons didn't get moving soon.

Ashok scrubbed furiously at his eyes to try to clear his vision. He kept his chain in front of him, expecting an attack from the larger wolf, but none came. When finally the cold abated, he saw the snowfang running after the other wolves. Those beasts did not appear to be in the grip of the same madness that afflicted the others, or perhaps they'd been able to shake off the effects once Ilvani was far enough away from the caravan. Now they had their prize and were fleeing.

It was the Martuck boy.



“What was that?” Ashok demanded. “It was no natural wolf.”

They stood together in a loose semicircle: Ashok, Skagi, Cree, the merchants, Mareyn, Kaibeth, while the rest of the caravan moved on up the trail. The nightmare paced the trail back and forth between Ashok and the approaching brigands. In the distance, he saw Ilvani and Daruk on the trail—two small figures against the mounted assault of the brigands. They would clash sometime in the next few minutes. Ashok and the rest gathered here were the buffer between the caravan and the brigands, if Daruk and Ilvani let any slip through.

“Snowfang,” Tatigan explained. He wiped blood from a deep cut on his forehead. His hands shook—from cold, pain, or fatigue, Ashok couldn’t guess. They were all weary to the point of breaking. “They’re in the family of winter wolves, but they’re colder bastards than their cousins. While the others attack, they wait until the prey’s soft and then come in to strike.” He cursed when he saw the Martucks standing nearby, leaning on each other for support. “Damn it—forgive me, Leesal. Your boy—”

“He might still be alive,” Vlahna said as she rode back to them. Wolf blood streaked her legs and arm where she held her chain. “I saw the wolves. They haven’t left the trail yet to go to their dens, but it’s clear that’s where they’re headed. It’s too dangerous to have at the boy on the trail. They’ll wait until they’re safe.”

“Give me your horse,” Mareyn said, grabbing Vlahna’s reins.

Vlahna wrenched them out of her grip. “They’ll tear you to pieces, Mareyn. You won’t take on a snowfang alone.” She raised her leg when Mareyn reached for the reins again. “I’ll plant you in the ground, human, no matter how short we are on blades, if you paw at me again.”

“So send more warriors,” the elder Martuck cried. “If there’s a chance he’s still alive, we have to try.”

"How thin would you have us stretch ourselves?" Vlahna said. "We've lost nearly half our strength in this last push over the mountains. A lot of good men and women are gone."

Ashok heard the grief in her voice. "Tuva?" he said.

Vlahna glanced at him and shook her head once. "Still with the caravan. He won't make it to Rashemen."

"Give Mareyn a horse," Ashok said. "I'll go with her to get the boy back."

Vlahna laughed harshly. "You and your stallion we can spare least of all, Ashok. If the witch and the bard fail, you'll let that thing unleash a scream that will bring the mountain down on our heads. It's the only way to buy us a chance against the brigands."

"They won't fail."

"I won't risk it."

"I've seen the nightmare's speed," Cree said. "We'll hold them until Ashok gets back." He glanced down the trail. "But if you're going, go now, by the gods. There's not much time."

Ashok held Vlahna's gaze. She stared him down, until finally, she nodded reluctantly.

"Go," she said. "But get back here soon."

Ashok ran to the nightmare while Vlahna dismounted to give Mareyn her horse.

He swung his leg over the stallion and pulled himself up. He was aware of every cut to his flesh, every wolf bite. The lingering cold from their attacks seeped into his bones, but while he rode the nightmare, it wouldn't slow him down.

"Stay far enough behind me so the horse won't bolt when we attack," Ashok told Mareyn. "When I raise my fist, be ready for the scream. Protect yourself, understand?"

"Just ride," Mareyn said grimly. "I'll be behind you."

Ashok didn't need to spur the nightmare on. He leaned forward and the stallion thundered up the trail. Fire spread

from his fetlocks and tail, and the ice on the hard ground turned to water and mud beneath his hooves.



Ilvani stood in the shadow of a rocky outcropping twenty feet above her. It was snowing again, or perhaps it had never really stopped. She was so used to it by now that she hardly noticed the sting of cold on her face.

What she couldn't ignore was the hemmed-in feeling she had out here. In front of her lay the brigands. Behind her, she heard Rashemi whispers. Already she could feel the spirits of the land calling to her and pulling at her. Above her, an owl circled in the gray sky. It watched her as she waited for Daruk to finish his survey of the area.

The bard stood several feet away, gauging the distance between them and the brigands approaching on horseback. They would be here in minutes. She already felt the hoofbeats shaking the ground. Above her, the owl uttered a sharp warning cry and flew away. Ilvani almost asked Daruk if he'd heard the call, but she knew he hadn't.

The bard walked over to her and rubbed his hands together for warmth before he drew his wand. "This is the best place for the show," he told her. "Are you up to it?"

"We'll ask," Ilvani said. "It's up to the mountains to answer."

"Well, this should be interesting, then," Daruk said.

Ilvani nodded and cast a spell. She levitated up the side of the outcropping until she reached the lip. Testing it with her weight, she found it solid enough and stepped down. Her boots slid an inch on the slick surface, but she righted herself and surveyed the pass from the height.

She saw now what Daruk had been studying so intently. Two narrow crevasses half-filled with snow crisscrossed each other and cut the trade route. Vlahna had tested them when the caravan came through and found one was solid enough for the wagons to pass over, but the other was a death trap

—loose snow fell out from under a traveler's foot and would send him or her plunging into a deep grave. The gap was not large, but they'd had to put down planks for the wagons to cross in safety.

Ilvani reached into her bag and pulled out a clear glass sphere with a shock of red silk trapped inside it. Concentrating, Ilvani cast a spell that filled the air with an icy fog. It spiraled down from her perch and slinked across the ground until it covered every part of the narrow pass below her. Through the fog, Daruk strode to meet the riders. Ilvani muttered another spell and pointed at the bard.

The riders came barreling up the pass a few breaths later but pulled up short when they saw the bard step into their midst. At their head, Thorm held up a hand, and the warriors reached for their crossbows. None of them had seen Ilvani yet.

I am invisible, just like the owls. The thought drifted through Ilvani's mind. She was a floating spirit, removed and cold. With her other hand, she reached into her pouch and closed her fingers around the stone Ashok had given her from the Tuigan grave. The sharp edges pressed into her flesh, reminding her that she was here. She was real.

"Well met, fellow travelers," Daruk greeted them as if they were old friends. He ignored the crossbows trained upon him. "I'm here to inform you that I've placed a toll on this part of the Golden Way. All who wish to pass must pay me, for I am the road keeper."

Chuckles and scoffs came from the riders. They didn't know whether to be irritated or amused by the human. Ilvani noticed that the bard never flinched. He was deep in the part he'd chosen to play.

A human like that was dangerous. He'd chosen parts for them all, but whatever he was playing at, the bard was most interested in Ashok. Daruk had infected him with Shar's power. She had smelled it on Ashok's skin. Why had he done it? Was it only to see how Ashok reacted?

She had no time to discover his motives. She must protect him now. Protecting him meant protecting the caravan. Arms at her sides, she curled her fingers into her palms and whispered a few words. Slowly, by inches, the mist rose around Daruk's legs.

"I know some of you are probably concerned that the fee will be too much for your company to bear," the bard said. "Fear not. I'm a reasonable man."

Ilvani heard the magic in his voice. To her it was only a soft, musical hum, but it had a hypnotic quality that kept the riders listening when they should have been firing. The brigands focused on the bard's words and didn't notice the change in the weather.

He's telling you, but you can't hear him, Ilvani thought. She gazed down at Thorm. So loud he's telling you—don't watch your feet. Be ready to ride, to run this fool into the ground, and take back what's yours. Take back your goods, and take from all the others.

*Don't watch your feet.*

"So, who will be the first to pay?" Daruk said. His voice was deceptively light. Ilvani heard the threat beneath the words.

Thorm glanced at the men with the crossbows. "Kill him," he said.

Time slowed as Ilvani heard the twang of the crossbow strings releasing their bolts. The deadly shots hit Daruk in the chest and neck and passed harmlessly through his flesh as if it were smoke.

"Well, look at that," the bard said. He touched his chest and feigned a look of awe. "A miracle, that's what this is." He winked at the brigands, and the illusion of him disappeared.

"A godsdamned miracle."

Now his voice came from farther up the pass. He smiled, raised his wand, and drove it into the ground.

A thunderous roar shook the air, traveled through rock and ice, and knocked three of the brigands from their rearing



horses. Ilvani put her free hand against the rock wall behind her and felt the pulse through the stone. With her other hand, she clutched her sphere and called on magic to strengthen Daruk's spell.

"Bring it down on their heads," she whispered, lacing the words with arcane power. "Bring the mountain down on them. Bury them under the ice."

The confused riders instinctively drew together. Thorm pointed to Daruk and yelled something unintelligible. It set the brigands in motion. They charged blindly through the mist.

Thorm's was among the first of the horses to hit the disguised crevasse. For one breath, they were a charging wall of death, and the next they were simply gone, plunging through the mist to their doom. The riders nearest him immediately saw the trick and yanked desperately on their reins, but for several of them it was just too late. They, too, fell and died.

The others retreated, which gave Daruk time to get off the path and away from the trembling mountain. Rocks started to fall around Ilvani. She slid her sphere back into her bag and turned to watch the snow slide down the mountain toward her.

The white wall rushed toward her amid the rumbling echoes of Daruk's magic and her own amplification spell. For a breath, Ilvani felt as the other shadar-kai did, staring into the face of death with such fascination that it made her heart pound. The avalanche would bury her if she didn't move—she would be gone in an instant.

Shouts echoed from the pass below her. The riders had seen her, but they were far more interested in the avalanche. A few of them spurred their horses forward and tried to jump the crevasse. Some made it, but many didn't.

Ilvani raised her arms and laughed aloud. The sound was lost in the thundering roar. She felt so alive. The white wall filled her vision, and the cold caressed her face.

Regretfully, Ilvani teleported away. Her body became insubstantial, and the cold, damp caress was gone.

When she reappeared next to Daruk, Ilvani saw the brigands were gone, and a fresh layer of powdery snow covered the ground. The scene was peaceful and still. Overhead, the owl had returned and circled the pass, but it made no sound.

"Finely played, witch," Daruk said. "We work well together, yes?"

"Yes. This is the last time we will," Ilvani said.

"Is that a prophecy?"

She looked up at him. He was taller than she was, but that wasn't surprising. He didn't try to use his height to intimidate her but merely stood watching her with curiosity.

"You'll try to take him," Ilvani said. "You've already begun the game. But you were right when you said I'd be a player. I won't let you have him."

He smiled benignly. "I don't know what's going on in your head, witch, but it sounds like madness to me."

"So it is," Ilvani said. She added, almost to herself. "But that doesn't mean there isn't truth in it."

"What if he decides to come of his own free will?" Daruk said. "What will you do then?"

Then I'll have to kill you, Ilvani thought. She didn't voice her decision aloud but trusted Daruk could read her black eyes well enough.



Ashok heard the distant thunderclap and felt the ground shake beneath him. Power from arcane and natural sources filled the air. He knew then that Ilvani and Daruk had been successful in springing their trap.

Ahead of him, he followed the snowfang tracks and those of the smaller winter wolves. He drew his chain, braced himself as the nightmare jumped a narrow crevasse, and

held on when the beast veered off the trail to follow the wolf scent.

Ashok heard Mareyn behind him some distance on Vlahna's horse. She stayed safely back from the nightmare's fire but kept pace with him. He glanced back at her once and saw her gaze fixed on the trail.

Suddenly, the tracks stopped. Ashok had no time to react before a blast of ice and wind swelled up around him. It enveloped the nightmare and for a breath extinguished his flame. They were a black speck in a sea of white. Blinded, Ashok swung out at random with his chain. He breathed in the frigid air and tasted wolf scent.

The nightmare screamed. The sound echoed off the rock walls around them and made Ashok throw his hands up to cover his ears. In response, the icy wind abated, but the nightmare's flame was a dull blue, diminished.

When his vision cleared, Ashok saw the icy vortex move toward Mareyn. The warrior was ready for it. She dismounted and let her horse ride away to safety. Drawing her blade, she dodged out of the path of the ministorm as Ashok jumped off the nightmare's back and came up on its other side with his chain. The vortex coalesced into the form of the snowfang.

Ashok readied his chain, but he kept an eye on the rocks and crevices around them. The snowfang had used the storm to cover the tracks of the other two wolves. Now they hid somewhere with the boy, waiting to strike.

Up close, the snowfang was immense. Thick strands of ice-matted fur hung off its body. It growled at Mareyn but kept one eye on Ashok and his chain. It tried to appraise both threats, but Ashok wasn't about to give the creature the chance to take their measure.

Ashok attacked with his chain. The spiked end struck the ground harmlessly as the wolf dodged the strike. Ashok was surprised at its speed. Since it had such a bulky body, he'd expected the wolf to have no grace.

Mareyn took advantage of the wolf's distraction to wade in with her sword. Ashok saw her expression change from fierce concentration to confusion and pain as she stabbed at the thing's chest. Her blade moved with agonizing slowness. She fumbled the strike and barely grazed the skin of the beast.

Ashok ran forward to aid her and encountered a wall of cold so intense that it stole his breath. His fingers went numb; he barely had the presence of mind to keep a grip on his weapon. This creature's aura was worse than any three of the winter wolves put together. At close range, the snowfang outmatched them.

"Get away from it!" Ashok cried. He staggered back and automatically looked for the nightmare's heat. The stallion stood several feet away. He had not fully regained his fire.

Ashok felt dread well up inside him for the first time since the battle with the wolves had begun. If the nightmare didn't join the battle, they were dead. Either the snowfang would wear them down with cold, or the other two wolves would spring on them when they least expected it.

Mareyn kept her sword in front of her and backed away from the snowfang, but the creature came after her, its claws raking deep gouges in her breastplate. Off balance under the weight of the attack, Mareyn collapsed. Her sword was her savior. She slashed wildly, protecting her body, and instead of biting her, the wolf retreated.

She didn't escape unscathed. The wolf tore a long gash in her side. Blood ran down her leg and pooled in the snow. She cupped the wound with her left hand, but Ashok doubted it would be enough to stop the bleeding.

Ashok planted his feet and struck out from a distance with his chain. The snowfang had grace, but it couldn't dodge the speed of his attacks. Keeping the chain always moving in deadly arcs, Ashok drew the monster's attention away from Mareyn to give the warrior time to recover.

The wolf hissed a breath that carried more ice and snow. Ashok went down in a crouch and whipped his cloak in front of his face to protect his eyes from the attack. The numbing cold enveloped him again, and when Ashok recovered enough to bring his weapon up, he misjudged the strike and slashed his own cheek with his weapon. Warm blood dribbled down his face and returned some of the feeling to his deadened skin.

Inspired—or desperate—Ashok wound his chain around his arm as Vlahna had done. He had no hard leather to protect him, so the spikes pierced his flesh. The action went against Uwan's edict that the shadar-kai must not weaken themselves by marking their own flesh, but Ashok had no choice. There was a greater threat here than the fear that he might diminish himself. He had to be able to fight through the cold, or he, Mareyn, and Les would die.

In the wake of its icy breath, the snowfang lunged at him. Ashok knew he couldn't get any colder, so he stretched out his arms, absorbed the wolf's weight, and let it drive him into the snow. He hugged the creature close to drive the spikes into its flesh. The wolf howled and snapped at him. It sank its teeth into his other forearm and shook vigorously. Ashok heard his armor tear. The wolf crushed the bone scales and punctured hard muscle.

Burning pain shot up Ashok's arm, restoring life to him even as the draining blood threatened to take it back. The snowfang had no idea that it helped Ashok by inflicting these wounds. He hugged the monster tighter and felt a rib crack as the wolf tried to tear his arm off. Neither would let go of their prizes.

Distantly, Ashok heard a deep-throated shout. He thought at first it was the wolves, but then he realized it was a human voice. The voice said something in a language Ashok didn't recognize. A breath later, he saw Mareyn in his periphery, half running, half stumbling toward the wolf. The warrior jumped and landed on the snowfang's back. She

hacked with her sword at the creature's flesh, finally penetrating its frozen hide.

The wolf jerked its head up and around, biting at the warrior. She gripped its flanks with her legs as if she rode a horse and kept striking, ignoring the cold that had turned her skin a wasted blue color.

A deep slash to its neck sent the snowfang into a frenzy. It broke Ashok's hold and rolled away in the snow. The force of its retreat threw Mareyn off its back, and Ashok felt his own rib snap as the beast rolled over him and picked itself up. Gasping, he came up to his knees and held his arm up in front of him, showing the wolf the blood-covered spikes.

Ashok heard a loud howl from behind and above him. He turned just in time to see one of the other winter wolves leap from a ledge farther up the mountain. Ashok teleported out of its way and appeared near where Mareyn lay in the snow.

The wolf hit the ground and limped to the snowfang. It left a trail of blood in the snow.

"Did you ... hit it?" Mareyn said. Her voice was weak from the cold. "Before you teleported?"

"I didn't have time," Ashok said. "I heard a voice—"

"Maybe it's the caravan ... catching up," Mareyn said.

"They can't be moving that fast." Ashok willed his flesh to solidify, even though it meant succumbing to the biting cold. The snowfang, distracted, licked the other wolf's wounds like a mother. Ashok considered his and Mareyn's own injuries with a grim outlook. If they didn't get warm soon, they would no longer be able to walk, let alone fight. Mareyn's side wound still bled. Ashok didn't know how she found the will to stay on her feet, but there she was, standing beside him again when finally his form became solid.

Ashok didn't wait for the snowfang to finish its ministrations. He came forward again and struck the wolf a blow to the hind leg with his bound arm. The spikes laid open its flesh and exposed muscle, but there was not nearly

enough strength behind the attack to cripple the beast. The snowfang turned and clawed Ashok's breastplate, tearing into the bone scales. Mareyn attacked from the side but had to turn away when the other wolf struck her from behind.

We're going to die, Ashok thought dimly as the wolf snapped at his face. The cold made his movements seem disconnected from his thoughts. He might as well have been watching the scene from outside his body. He registered the deep red stains in the snow, the weakening of the snowfang's attacks. They wouldn't lose the fight by much, but they would still lose.

A fire ignited in Ashok's periphery.

He saw it reflected in the snowfang's blue eyes. The nightmare had come back to life, shaking off the preternatural cold. His whole body burned, illuminating the scene in gold. A scream shook the air, and Ashok felt the torturous sound slam into him, jolting him back into his body.

"Take him," Ashok growled.

The nightmare charged, eating up the distance between them in a breath. The stallion reared and brought his hooves down on the snowfang's back. Ashok barely had time to roll out of the way before the snowfang fell. Pinned, the wolf got the full brunt of the nightmare's fire. But the nightmare wasn't done. The stallion sank his teeth into the wolf's neck and tore at its flesh.

Ashok got to his feet and went to help Mareyn with the other wolf. The smaller one was weak from its wounds and was nearly dead when Ashok got to it. Mareyn leaned on Ashok for support, and together they watched the nightmare's fire finally penetrate the aura of cold surrounding the snowfang. Its body caught and burned.

When the snowfang lay still in the snow, the nightmare's fire died away to a dim blaze that Ashok felt even across the space between them. He started toward the stallion, but stopped when Mareyn resisted.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm not going near ... that one," she said. "But I'm grateful."

"His fire will warm us," Ashok said. "If we don't get heat back into our bodies, we'll die before the caravan reaches us."

Mareyn sighed and nodded. She let him lead her over to the nightmare but stopped before she was close enough to touch him.

"Gods, I can smell the blood on its breath," she said. "But it is warm, at least."

"I don't notice the scent anymore," Ashok said.

They stood in uncomfortable silence for a moment, absorbing the nightmare's heat. As soon as she was warm enough, Mareyn moved away. She looked at the bodies of the wolves in consternation.

"The other one must still be around here somewhere," she said. "It'll have Les."

"There are tracks here." Ashok pointed to where the other wolf had come down from the snow-covered rocks.

They picked their way carefully up the slope and came eventually to a ridge that looked down on a bowl-shaped valley lined with jagged rocks and icicles.

Below them, hanging off a large rock, they found the body of the other winter wolf. Les lay in the snow beside the dead wolf, on what looked like an animal skin. A burly man crouched over the wolf with a skinning knife. He looked up when Ashok and Mareyn crested the ridge.

He had wild, red-blond hair and a tangled beard that half obscured his wrinkled face. A wolf pelt rode on his back. For a brief instant, he reminded Ashok of his father, a big man in hide armor, his hair shining red in the meager sunlight. The vision hit him sharply and made Ashok catch his breath. He recovered quickly and caught Mareyn's arm when she started down the slope.

"We don't know he's an ally," Ashok warned her.



“That’s why I haven’t put my blade away,” Mareyn said, but she was no longer looking at him. She fixed her attention on Les’s unconscious form.

As she moved down the slope, Ashok called out to the man in Common. “Well met. You have our thanks for killing the wolf. If you hadn’t, we’d be dead.”

The man’s gaze shifted from him to Mareyn. It was impossible to read his expression. He put his skinning knife away and pulled a length of rope from his belt. He used it to tie the wolf’s back legs together.

Mareyn had reached the boy. Ashok kept his weapon looped around his arm, but the man ignored Mareyn and stood up. He turned his back to them and dragged the wolf carcass up the slope in the opposite direction.

“Are you of the Rashemi?” Ashok called after him. He knew they must be nearly in the witches’ lands.

The man paused to look back at them. His expression reminded Ashok of Ilvani. He looked at them without seeing them, almost as if he inhabited another world entirely, and they were only shadows probing at the edge of his vision. Then the man turned away and resumed dragging his burden up the slope. Ashok watched him until he was almost out of sight.

“Ashok, we have to get Les down to the nightmare,” Mareyn said.

Shaken from his thoughts, Ashok bent to examine the boy. His leg was broken, twisted out awkwardly from his body, but otherwise there were no physical wounds. The wolf’s teeth had torn away most of his boot, but the flesh beneath was intact. The boy’s eyes were half-open, but he didn’t seem to recognize Mareyn, even when she spoke to him in a soothing voice.

She was right. Cold was the enemy now.

He ripped off some pieces of his bone scale armor to use as a splint. The snowfang had ruined most of the

breastplate. He'd have to replace the rest. Mareyn took rope from her pack and together they worked on the boy's leg.

When they tried to move him, Les came to life at last. The pain made him jerk and thrash about in the snow. Ashok took hold of the boy's shoulders and pressed him down while Mareyn spoke quickly in his ear. After long minutes, she got him to know her, and he calmed. She took her cloak off and draped it over him, rubbing his arms and legs to warm him.

"Let's go," she said. "Take his shoulders. I'll brace his legs so the pain won't overwhelm him."

They lifted him. The boy moaned but made no other complaint. Even so, it was a long, slow climb out of the small valley and back down to the nightmare. Ashok carried the boy over to the stallion and started to drape him over the nightmare's back.

"You can't mean to let that thing carry him?" Mareyn said incredulously. "It's a demon, not a packhorse."

"It's the only way to keep him alive until we get back to the caravan," Ashok said. "You and I are too weak to carry him far."

"He's barely conscious. What's to stop the nightmare from invading his dreams?"

Ashok wouldn't lie to her. "Nothing," he said. "You'll have to watch him closely once we return. He'll need someone nearby who can tell him what's real and what isn't. At least he'll be alive."

Mareyn opened her mouth to argue, but in the end, she said nothing. They arranged the boy carefully on the nightmare's back and started down the trade route to meet the caravan.

For a long time, neither spoke. Weariness and pain marked Mareyn's face. She checked the boy to see if he still breathed. Her own wound bled through the hasty bandage she'd put on it. Ashok watched her struggle through the pain to put one foot in front of the other.

The idea of pain as a weakening force in humans was a concept he still could not grasp. He wanted to tell Mareyn to use the pain, to let the burn in her side act as the anchor that kept her centered in this world.

Humans functioned differently. Pain yanked at their souls the way the shadows pried at his, tempting them to oblivion.

"Stop looking at me like that," Mareyn said abruptly.

"Like what?" Ashok said.

"Like a shadar-kai." She laughed, but it turned into a groan. "When you're human and you've lived in Ikemmu long enough, you start to notice that shadar-kai look. It's either distaste or intense fascination—the fascination is more disturbing, if you want the truth. That's how you looked at me just now."

"I'm sorry," Ashok said. "It's just—"

"I know," Mareyn said. "We're too different for it to be otherwise."

Silence fell between them again, but it didn't last long. Mareyn slowed her pace until she was barely moving at all. Ashok came up behind her and touched her shoulder.

"We need to keep moving," he said. "The nightmare can carry both of you if you need to rest."

"Not even Tymora's blessing could coax me onto that beast," Mareyn said. "And I have to keep a clear head. I can't afford to have nightmares haunting me the rest of this journey."

"At least stay close to its warmth."

They picked up the pace. After another long silence, Mareyn said, "Did someone do that for you—tell you what was real and what wasn't—when you first tamed the beast?"

"Vedoran," Ashok said. "He was a sellsword and one of my first companions when I came to Ikemmu. He was with me when I awoke from the worst of the dreams."

"The two of you were close?"

"For a time, yes."

“But he’s gone now, isn’t he?” Mareyn said. “Otherwise he would be here on this journey with you.”

“Yes. Vedoran would have relished a challenge like this,” Ashok said, gazing at the unforgiving landscape, the beauty of the snow-covered mountains. When he turned away, he caught her looking at him with a wistful, sad expression in her eyes. “What is it?”

“I was just thinking of a question that’s hard to ask, and maybe it’s not entirely fair.”

“You can ask anything you want,” Ashok said. He noticed that conversation distracted her from the pain, kept her alert and moving.

“When you volunteered to come with me to save Les, what was your first thought? Did you do it out of concern for the boy? Was it for me, or did you do it because you wanted to hunt down the snowfang?”

Ashok thought back to the moments after the wolf battle. They’d all been distracted by the need for haste, both to evade the brigands and to catch up with the escaping wolves. The snowfang had blinded him with its frost breath. Ashok remembered feeling anger, both at the snowfang and at himself for being caught off guard. He’d promised himself it wouldn’t happen again, that the next time they encountered each other, Ashok would have the upper hand.

He tried to sort out where in the tangle of those thoughts he’d considered Les or Mareyn, but he couldn’t get past the excitement he’d felt at the possibility of the chase, of using the nightmare’s fire to burn the snowfang down.

His silence seemed answer enough for Mareyn. The wistful expression deepened. “I didn’t really expect anything more or less from you,” she admitted. “And you’ll always have my deepest gratitude for what you did for me—for Les—out here.”

“There’s no need to—”

“Yes, there is,” she said, cutting him off. “It’s strange—the other races in Ikemmu, especially the humans, view your

people in so many different lights. I used to wonder why your leaders revered Tempus. All this time, I'd convinced myself the shadar-kai were meant to be Tymora's servants. Your fortunes and fates are so mercurial. You plunge into every experience as if it could be your last, and you dance right to the edge. I love to watch you when you fight for the same reason. I thought you were embracing life by behaving that way."

Ashok shook his head. "Most of us are just trying to avoid death."

"Yes, and you'll court any force to do it," Mareyn said, "fortune, misfortune, creation, destruction. For your people, survival comes before everything—fear, compassion, love, hate. To put any other emotion first is a struggle for you."

"A struggle, but it's worth the cost," Ashok said, remembering Reltnar and the slaughter room of his enclave. There lay the consequences of putting survival above everything else.

"The night we shared together—for you, it was a means to keep from fading," Mareyn said. "You don't seek companionship for the same reasons I do. I might be looking for fun, for comfort in the night, a taste of joy on a hard, cold journey. But you—you'll share pleasure with me, but if it's meant to aid your own survival, I don't think I want to be responsible for that."

"So you don't think we share Tymora's kiss?" Ashok said, an edge of mockery in his voice. "Our paths didn't cross by the will of your goddess so that we could bring good fortune to each other?"

For a long time, she didn't reply. He thought he'd angered her. Then she stopped and laid her hand over his. "Do you think I'm afraid of you, Ashok?" she asked. "Is that why you try to keep me at bay? Or do you truly hate the gods that much?"

"I ride the nightmare—the demon; you'd be wise to be afraid," Ashok said harshly.

She laughed, which shocked him. "Oh, Ashok, don't make the mistake of thinking you're the most frightening thing I've seen in Faerûn. You're not." She stroked the scars on his knuckles. "I've seen things here you can't imagine. That's why I want to be careful not to treat you too lightly. You're not ready. Someday you might be, and maybe our paths will cross again when you return from Rashemen."

"Nothing will have changed," Ashok said. "You said it yourself—we're too different. I'm not like you."

"We'll see. Until then, take care of Ilvani," Mareyn said. "I want her to find the peace she needs."

"So do I." In that, at least, they were united. "I hope whatever path you walk continues to bring your goddess's favor," he said. "May Tymora never disappoint you."

They walked the rest of the way in silence, until they heard the rumble of wagons and the snuffling of weary horses. Slowly the caravan came into view, diminished but safe.

"They did it," Ashok said. "Ilvani and Daruk drove back the brigands."

"Tymora be praised," Mareyn said. Briefly, she embraced him, and they went to join the others.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE CARAVAN SPENT THREE DAYS TENDING TO ITS WOUNDED and seeing to the dead. Vlahna sent scouts ahead to report on how far they were from the road out of the mountains. Blessedly, they were only a day away from passing out of the mountains and into Rashemen. Their remaining supplies would hold out long enough for them to get to Mulsantir.

Despite this news, the caravan crew was discouraged and grieved for their losses. The Martucks were elated to have their boy returned to them, but Ashok sat on guard duty each of those three nights and listened to Les toss in his sleep until finally the boy woke up screaming. His parents sat up with him and never slept. They endured it when the boy woke and yelled and lashed out at them with loosely clenched fists when he didn't recognize them. By the third night, he was quieter in his dreaming, but Ashok knew the nightmare still worked on his mind. The boy was probably reliving his ordeal with the wolves. The Martucks never accused Ashok of anything, but they stayed as far away from him and the nightmare as the caravan would allow.

Here again was the price. Ashok had brought the beast into their midst to protect the caravan and especially to protect Ilvani. He, Les, and Mareyn would have certainly died without the nightmare's intervention with the snowfang. But Vlahna had been right. The cost for such protection was to allow a monster to walk among them, and Ashok held its reins.

Of all of them, the dying Tuva seemed in the best spirits. The pain he felt walking around must have been unfathomable, but Ashok saw how it sharpened him and narrowed the focus of his world to include only the caravan and its crew. That single-minded intent probably saved them from despair and more deaths during those three days.

On the fourth day, when everyone was well enough to travel, they moved out, and Tuva stayed at the back of the caravan with Ashok, the brothers, and Ilvani. Ashok held the nightmare well back from the others, just barely keeping the rear of the caravan in sight. Tuva walked beside him.

"Your friends told me what happened to you the night you encountered the Tuigan," Tuva said. "What was it like, riding with ghosts?"

"Like nothing I can describe," Ashok said. "I felt ... immortal, as if I was part of a tale that had been hundreds of years in the telling."

Tuva nodded. "You did a great service for that warrior, guiding him to Tempus's side."

"I don't know that it was Tempus who claimed his soul," Ashok said. "It could have been any god."

"It was Tempus." Tuva smiled. Ashok noticed a faint sheen of blood on his lips. "You are His emissary. It was right to ... be you." His steps faltered.

Ashok reached out, intending to support the warrior, but Tuva brushed his hand away and kept walking.

"I should call Vlahna," Ashok said.

Tuva shook his head. "We've had words already. I won't see her again." He focused on Ashok's face with an effort. "Do you have a message for Him, Ashok, if my soul makes it to his side?"

"You will make it," Ashok said. "Tempus gains a great warrior this day. Tell Him that, and may He never forget it."

Tuva chuckled weakly. "I like you, Ashok. You have a sharp tongue, and you're fearless. I'll walk beside you a little longer," he said.

He took three more steps and was dead before he fell. Ashok caught the man gently at the shoulders and lowered his body to the ground.

"Tempus," Ashok said. His voice hardened. "Remember my words. Claim your warrior's soul, and *never* forget his worth."



He held Tuva's body in silence for several long moments while the caravan passed on out of sight ahead of them. The warrior's body went cold so fast—another soul gone, yet Ashok still lived.

Tuva, Olra, Vedoran, Chanoch.

If he closed his eyes, Ashok could see them all standing before him out of the shadows.

Waiting.

When he heard the sound of hoofbeats, Ashok looked up. He wasn't surprised to see Cree riding toward him. Ilvani rode beside him on Skagi's horse.

"You felt it?" Ashok asked Ilvani.

The witch nodded. She and Cree kneeled beside Tuva's body. Cree said a prayer for the warrior—no less fervent than Ashok's, but perhaps more respectful.

True to Tuva's words, Vlahna led the caravan on while Ashok and Ilvani stayed behind to tend to Tuva's body. Ilvani spoke a few words and moved her hands over the shadar-kai's body. Flames spread from her hands and consumed him. It reminded Ashok too much of Olra's funeral, and he turned away quickly to follow the caravan.

Ilvani lingered. She watched the road ahead of them with trepidation.

"What is it?" Ashok asked. "Do you see something?"

"An owl," Ilvani said.

Ashok looked, but there were no birds in the sky. "What does it mean?"

"One spirit is gone, but the others are waiting," Ilvani said. "The monsters are gone, but there are more frightening things this side of the mountains."

"We'll deal with whatever comes," Ashok said. "You won't have to face it alone."

Ilvani nodded, but she kept casting glances at the sky, and Ashok saw her rubbing her arms where she'd cut herself. The wounds had healed, but it was as if she could still feel them.

As they walked together, Ashok found himself wishing he could ask her about Tuva's soul. Would she know if Tempus claimed it? Ashok wanted Tuva to find peace with his god. He wanted to think of all the souls of his friends at rest, even if he could not claim that peace for himself. Knowing his companions were free of their burdens, Ashok felt as if he could face his own shadows.



The caravan came down out of the High Country, where Rashemen spread out before them. The foothills were rough terrain, and the weather stayed bitterly cold, but the wind died down for a spell, giving them an unbroken vista of the snow-covered country. The sun came out two days after Tuva's death. For the first time it shone so brightly, it pained Ashok's eyes.

He found himself staring up at the bright light until his head throbbed and orange and yellow spots completely obscured his vision. More than once, he caught himself falling behind, and finally he forced himself to concentrate on the path ahead.

The sun turned the packed snow to glistening diamonds, and this, too, threatened to dazzle his eyes, but Ashok kept moving until the caravan drew to a halt after highsun.

They'd stopped for a rest not long ago. Ashok knew there must be something wrong. He took the nightmare and rode to the front of the caravan, taking a wide route so as not to disturb the horses.

In the distance, riders approached. Ashok reached for his chain. When they got closer, he saw they resembled the man he and Mareyn had encountered in the mountains. They were dressed in similar hide or leather armor and carried long knives, bows, and arrows.

Vlahna rode up next to Tatigan's wagon and waited while the merchant climbed down to accompany her to meet the group. Skagi rode up beside Ashok.

"Strange, they don't look happy to see us," he said.

"Be ready in case that's true," Ashok murmured.

Skagi nodded. The riders fanned out around them. They ranged in age from twenty to fifty winters, in Ashok's estimation. The eldest, a bearded warrior with long gray braids and a tattoo of a raven on his neck, came forward to meet Tatigan.

"Well met, Ralemvic of the Raven lodge," said Tatigan, raising a hand to greet the warrior. "Do you remember me?"

The Rashemi nodded. "You're known to me and to the people of Thasunta, Tatigan. My people speak of you as a fair trader. On any other day, I would welcome you to these lands."

"Oh? Why not this day? Forgive me, but as you can see, my fellows and I walked a hard road. We hoped to beg the hospitality of Thasunta," Tatigan said. His tone was mild, but Ashok had been on the road with the merchant long enough to detect the tension underlying the words.

"I see that you've had a difficult time," Ralemvic said. "But you won't find sanctuary here. Our nights and days have been disturbed of late. The spirits walk about the land, restless and unfriendly to those they encounter. You will be much better off passing through Rashemen and heading west into Thesk to trade your wares. Many who would have bought and sold goods refuse to leave their homes. They work and prepare offerings to appease the spirits."

Ashok and Skagi exchanged a glance. The news confirmed what they'd suspected all along. Whatever affliction had spread among the creatures of the Shadowfell was also present in Rashemen.

"We had hoped to stop and trade here and in Tinnir," Tatigan said regretfully, "but if that village, too, has shut itself off, there's no reason for us to linger. But surely we may find willing merchants in Mulsantir?"

"I can't speak for Mulsantir," Ralemvic said. "Our concerns are Thasunta and the road between it and Tinnir. You have

the freedom to travel. I warned of the dangers. Bhalla protect you.”

“My thanks,” Tatigan said, “and take care, yourselves.”

Ralemvic nodded. He wheeled his horse around, and his companions made to follow. Before he turned away, the elder warrior cast his gaze over the caravan again. When he noticed Ashok and Skagi at the edge of the road, his eyes widened. He quickly masked the reaction and rode away, but Ashok noticed that he dug his heels into his horse’s sides to spur the animal faster.

“Did you see that?” Ashok said.

“I saw it,” Skagi said. “Either they’ve never seen a shadar-kai before—”

“Or they *have* seen our kind and made enemies of them,” Ashok said.

“Unless he recognized your pony,” Skagi said. “He’s enough to make anyone fidgety.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think he could tell what the beast was at this distance,” Ashok said. The nightmare’s flame burned low in the bitter cold. He’d never appeared so much like a common black stallion. Even his fear aura was limited to a few feet out from his body. Ashok was grateful. He hadn’t tried to put the enchanted necklace back on the nightmare. Without a cleric nearby, if the stallion resisted as forcefully as he had last time, Ashok would have been in no condition to help his friends in Rashemen.

“Won’t help our cause, him looking at us like that,” Skagi said.

“We have to hope they’ll be more welcoming in Mulsantir,” Ashok agreed.

“Ashok.”

Ashok turned and saw Cree ride up. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know—maybe nothing, but Ilvani wandered off by herself toward the village. Mareyn rode after her.”

Ashok and Skagi followed Cree back along the caravan line. It didn’t take them long to catch up to Ilvani and

Mareyn.

The witch stood before a small pinewoods where the tree branches were heavy with snow. Mareyn stayed on her horse, but Ilvani walked among the trees, running her hands over the bare inner branches where there were fewer needles. As Ashok and the brothers looked on quietly, she climbed into the closest tree, using the low-hanging branches as ladder steps. She sat on a thick branch midway up the tree and shifted to face them. Her gaze was unfocused, but her hands moved over the tree branches as if she knew them intimately. She ran her fingers over the bark and down to touch her own leg.

"No blood," she said, "but the rest is the same. The snow rabbit was here. She lived all of it."

"What is she talking about?" Mareyn asked Ashok.

"Her dreams," Ashok said. "She recognizes this place."

"I can feel her everywhere," the witch said. "She's closer than she's ever been." Her breath came faster, and her eyes were wide and terrified. She gripped the branches to keep from falling out of the tree.

"We should make a guard around the wood," Cree said to his brother. "You heard the Rashemi. We could be in for an attack we won't see coming."

"He's right," Ashok said, but his attention was still on Ilvani.

Skagi nodded, and the brothers split up to watch the fringes of the wood. Ashok dismounted, and Mareyn followed suit.

"You should get back to the caravan," Ashok told her. "If they haven't noticed our absence, they'll already be moving out."

"I'll tell them to wait for you," Mareyn said.

"No." Ashok gripped her arm. "This is where we split up. If Ilvani has seen this place in her dreams, there's a good chance we'll find answers here about the maddened creatures."

"It isn't wise to stay here with only the four of you," Mareyn said, "even with the nightmare standing guard."

"This was always our mission," Ashok told her. "It's the only way Ilvani will find peace from her dreams. Will you tell Tatigan to look for us when the caravan passes back through this way?"

"I'll tell him," Mareyn said. She looked at him a moment, a mixture of emotions in her eyes. She stepped forward and clasped Ashok by the shoulders affectionately. "The Martucks have decided to stay in Thesk for the winter. Les needs time to heal, and he won't find peace on the road. Beyond that, I don't know where they'll go, but it's certain I won't see you on the return trip."

"I'm sorry for that—and for other things," Ashok said. "What happened to the boy was—"

"Life," Mareyn said, cutting him off. "We deal with the good luck we find and the bad that's forced on us. Tymora reminds me of this daily. Les will learn to deal with his scars, just as you've done."

Ashok nodded, but his gaze kept straying to Ilvani's stricken face. He felt torn between the things he wanted to say to Mareyn—emotions he might not be able to sort out if he had days or months—and the urgency of Ilvani's need.

Mareyn must have seen his internal struggle. "Go," she told him. "She needs you to change her fortunes. And maybe she will change yours."

"Good-bye, Mareyn," Ashok said.

She smiled a little self-consciously, hooked an arm around his neck, and tugged him to her. She kissed him quickly and then nudged him away.

"Good-bye, Ashok," she said.

After Mareyn rode away, Ashok went to where Ilvani sat in the tree. He stood below her, his head on a level with her boots.

She looked down at him. "No more sleep," she said.

"I agree," Ashok said. "We'll go to the village. If there are witches in Tinnir, we'll find them."

Ilvani leaned her cheek against the tree and closed her eyes. "Each of these trees has a name. They're telling me, whispering the names, but they don't realize I can't repeat them. Names like that weren't meant to be spoken by human tongues."

"Can you shut them out?" Ashok asked. "Maybe you should come down from there."

"They don't mean any harm." Ilvani slowly climbed down out of the tree, but she kept her hands on the smooth branches. "They gave me another name, one I can use. Yaraella."

Ashok felt a chill, colder than the frigid air, go through him. He thought it must be the wind, but the tree boughs were still. It was so quiet in the wood. The animals had sought shelter in anticipation of the deep winter.

"The woman from your dreams," Ashok said. "She's been here?"

"She's all over these woods," Ilvani said. "Tinnir is her home, but the spirits know her here. They miss her touch."

"Let's go, then," Ashok said. "The sooner we get to Tinnir, the sooner we can find out what happened to her."

Skagi and Cree met them outside the wood. They followed a track off the Golden Way. Snow-covered signs indicated Tinnir wasn't far away, but the evening darkness came swiftly and forced them to camp for the night.



Ilvani was true to her promise. She didn't sleep, and she noticed Ashok and the brothers were too restless to get more than a pair of hours each. In the morning, they moved on.

They passed a wooded vale that Ilvani recognized again from her dreams. She was so close to Yaraella, she felt as if she were coming home herself. When they arrived at the

outskirts of Tinnir after midday, she nearly wept at the familiar dwellings.

If I'm not rid of her soon, I won't be Ilvani anymore, Ilvani thought. I'll be the witch—the ghost.

The uneven ground gave way to small farm fields, their remaining vegetation sealed in a frost skin. Cree stopped and pulled up one of the plants.

"These fields were never harvested," he said.

"Maybe winter came early," Skagi suggested. He kicked the brittle leaves.

"No. It's all dead," Ilvani said. She took the plant stalk from Cree. "Dead and withered. It was a punishment."

"Hmph. Must have insulted one of those telthors pretty bad for them to do all this," Skagi said.

"Over here," Ashok said.

Ilvani dropped the withered plant and walked over to Ashok. He pointed to a fenced pen behind one of the houses. A dead horse lay on the ground, its body covered with a fine layer of snow. Frozen blood hung from its nostrils.

"Why didn't they bury it?" Skagi said disgustedly.

"No smoke coming from the house," Cree said. "Whoever lived here must have left very quickly. It looks like they didn't take anything with them."

"Only the clothes they wore," Ilvani said. How could they not? She felt the sense of unwelcome in the air. An unspoken menace hovered over the village. This was the center of everything.

"Ashok, Cree," Skagi said tersely, "look to the road."

Ilvani tore her gaze away from the corpse of the horse and saw people coming toward them from the village—six armed men led by three women who wore carved wooden masks that obscured their features. One of the women carried a child in her arms. A chill gripped Ilvani when she saw the little one.

"Draw no weapons," said one of the masked women in Common, "or we'll strike you down."



Ashok, Cree, and Skagi surrounded Ilvani as the warriors converged on them. “We don’t come to Tinnir in violence,” Cree said.

The woman gave a raspy laugh muffled by her mask. “Your souls are filled with nothing but violence, shadow man,” she said. She pointed to the nightmare. “You walk with demons, yet you ask us to believe you come in friendship?”

Cree had no reply for that. Ilvani could imagine how they all looked to the witches of Rashemen—for this must surely be them. Cree with his single eye and devouring serpent tattoo; Skagi and his deformed smile; and Ashok and his nightmare. Did the witches see the scars around his spirit? To Ilvani they were as vivid as the fiery death that walked at his side. Did the witches see her scars?

“We’ve come to seek the counsel of the witches of Rashemen,” Ashok said. “Are you one we might speak with?”

The masked woman stepped forward. Ilvani couldn’t see her expression, but she sensed power in the mask, and in the body of the woman—power and anger.

“I am Agny,” she said, “and you will speak only to answer for your crimes against this village and its people.”

“Crimes?” Skagi said. He kicked the dead plants again. “You’re mad if you think we’re to blame for this.”

“We’ve never set foot in this village before today,” Ashok said.

“Yet you’ve been traveling many days to get here,” said another of the witches. Ilvani started. Something about the woman was familiar. “We saw a vision of you in the High Country, your gazes fixed on our lands like predators on the hunt.”

“I remember,” Ilvani said, stepping forward. She felt Ashok tense beside her, but she ignored him. She recognized where she’d heard the woman’s voice before. Hers was one of the whispers she’d been hearing ever since they approached Rashemen. “Your gazes poked and prodded like

the telthors,” she said, “always trying to get in where you’re not welcome.”

“Who are you to speak so of the spirits?” the witch Agny cried.

“I’m—” Ilvani was distracted by the child squirming in her keeper’s arms. The little one stared at Ilvani and made impatient noises to be set down. For some reason, it frightened Ilvani. She didn’t want the girl near her.

“Take them,” Agny said impatiently. “Leave the woman to me to question.”

Ilvani couldn’t speak. There were too many whispers in her head. Not just spirits—the whisper and chatter of drawn weapons. Ashok and the brothers pressed their bodies close, too close to her. She couldn’t breathe. She was back in her cage.

“Get away!” she yelled. She shoved her way past Ashok and Cree, ignoring their cries for her to stop. She had to get away, so she ran blindly forward. The tip of a warrior’s sword flashed in front of her, but Ilvani kept running, not caring if she ran onto his blade.

A force hit her in the chest and drove her to the ground. At first, she thought it was the sword, but the impact had been blunt. Magic, she reasoned, and the suspicion was confirmed a breath later when she felt the latent energy of the spell pass out of her body. Her chest ached, but it wasn’t a fatal blow by any stretch.

Ilvani rolled onto her back. Her vision took in the sky and the figures standing around her, but all the sounds came as if from a great distance. Ashok and the brothers struggled in the grip of the Rashemi warriors, who stayed their attacks at the muffled shouts of Agny. She closed her eyes to block out the sights and sounds.

What were they waiting for?

Then she felt the child’s arms encircle her waist.



Ashok had his chain half off his belt when the strong arms of Agny's warriors grabbed him. Another came around his neck, completely immobilizing him. He jerked his head around enough to see Skagi and Cree similarly pinned. Skagi was on the ground not far from where Ilvani had fallen after being hit by some spell of Agny's. For a breath, Ashok had thought she was dead. His reason fled, and it took all three of the warriors to restrain him.

The nightmare reared and screamed at the violent outburst. The Rashemi warriors backed away, but one of the other witches came forward and threw up her hands.

An aura of unnatural silence descended on the area around the stallion. When the nightmare tried to scream again, he found his voice gone. Ashok tried to free himself, instinctively reaching for the beast. He needed the nightmare's fire to burn through the men who held him.

Suddenly, Agny's shouts changed and resounded with a shrill desperation that made Ashok pause in his struggles.

The child had broken free of the witch holding her. With a pinched look of determination on her round face, she ran to where Ilvani lay. There was absolutely no fear in her eyes. She lay down beside the witch and wrapped her arms around her.

Ashok's arms went slack. A stunned silence settled over the combatants. Even Skagi seemed at a loss to explain the strange spectacle of Ilvani and the child.

Ilvani looked at the girl as if she were an unpleasant insect that had just landed on her arm, but she seemed reluctant to brush her off. On the other hand, the child appeared enraptured by the witch, burying her face in her dress and drawing in the witch's scent.

"Don't hurt her," the other masked witch said. "I beg you."

"It's my fault, Sister," said the witch who'd been holding the child. "I will give my life—"

"Be silent," Agny told them both. She clenched her hands into fists. "Tell your men to step back, Slengolt. Don't harm

them.”

One of the warriors barked an order, and the others released Ashok and the brothers. Skagi went for his falchion, which had been on the ground next to him under the boot of one of the warriors.

“Don’t,” Ashok told him. “We said we didn’t come in violence. We stay true to that promise.” He met Agny’s eyes. “Ilvani won’t harm the child.”

Even as he spoke, he could tell the witch didn’t believe him. “Come to me, Elina,” she pleaded with the child. “Come away from that woman. She’s dangerous.”

“You should listen to your keeper,” Ilvani said to the child. It was the first time she’d spoken since Agny had struck her down. “I’m not who you think I am.”

The little girl shook her head and held on tighter.

Ilvani sighed impatiently and sat up. Ashok watched her carefully extricate the girl and set her aside. The child immediately crawled back and tried to climb into her lap. Ilvani pushed her away—not as gently the second time.

The witches tensed. Ashok watched as the child’s eyes filled with tears. She started to cry. Her sobs were loud in the stillness. The effect on the watching crowd was that of helpless confusion. For her part, Ilvani sighed again and gave in, letting the girl scramble into her lap. She held her arms out awkwardly from her body so as little of her was touching the girl as possible.

“Explain this,” Agny said, her voice betraying her helpless anger. “Explain yourselves!”

Ashok found himself wanting to say the same thing. He had no explanation for any of it.

“Ilvani,” he said. “What—”

“It’s Yaraella,” Ilvani said tersely.

“What?” This from the other masked witch. “What did you say?”

“She smells her mother’s scent on me,” Ilvani said. “Yaraella is in me and on me. The offspring can tell.” She

reached out hesitantly and ran two fingers through the child's hair. To the onlookers it might have seemed like a gesture of affection, but Ashok knew Ilvani better than that.

"The hair is the same," Ilvani said. "Her eyes—it's the snow rabbit, only smaller." She looked up at Agny. "I have to get rid of her."

"Elina," Agny said. "Please ..."

"Not the offspring," Ilvani said urgently. "The mother. You have to help me get rid of her."

Agny and Ilvani stared at each other. Finally, Agny stepped forward. Ashok paced her step for step, making sure she was aware of him watching in the background. Agny nodded to him once and then kneeled beside Ilvani and the child.

"Will you let me look at you?" she asked Ilvani.

It was an odd question, since the two witches hadn't taken their eyes off each other, but he knew it must be a deeper connection Agny sought, a magical one.

Ilvani glanced up at Ashok. He saw the uncertainty in her eyes.

"It's up to you," he said. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

Ilvani turned back to Agny and nodded. "Do it," she said.

Agny put her hands against Ilvani's temples. She closed her eyes and murmured something under her breath. Ashok couldn't make out most of the words, but he recognized that she uttered the name "Bhalla" several times, the same name Ralemvic had used in his farewell to Tatigan.

When she opened her eyes, Agny was breathing hard. Her hands trembled. She looked from Ilvani to the child and back again.

"We need to speak—alone," Agny said. She looked up at Ashok and the brothers. "Will you all come with me?"

"Sister, is this wise?" the other masked witch asked.

"Yes, Sree," Agny said. "If you'd seen what I did just now, you'd agree. We'll go to Yaraella's hut. You and Reina and

the warriors will stand guard outside.”

“What about the demon?” Reina asked. She held up her hands, prepared to cast a spell on the nightmare.

“He won’t attack unless you provoke him,” Ashok said.

Agny eyed the beast with suspicion. “Put it in a stable. Reina, secure it with a protective circle. It won’t be harmed,” Agny said when Ashok started to protest, “unless it provokes us.” She looked at Ilvani. “Will you come?”

“Will you take Yaraella away?” Ilvani asked.

“I’ll try,” Agny said. “That is all I can promise.”

“Then we’ll come.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

INSIDE THE HUT, AGNY LIT A FIRE. SHE LAID A BUNDLE OF twigs and dried leaves on the hearth and whispered a prayer over them.

Ilvani sat in a corner near the flames. The child stayed close to her, holding on to a piece of her dress.

"Please, share the fire," Agny told Ashok and the brothers. "It will only grow colder outside, but you already know that."

Skagi lingered near the door, but Cree sat down in front of the fire. Ashok sat next to him.

"Whom do you pray to?" Cree asked. He gestured to the offering.

"Bhalla—the goddess also known as Chauntea," Agny explained. "But I also beseech the spirits of the trees. Yaraella was especially close to the telthors of the pinewoods. I'm asking them to remember her and think well of those gathered here. We need all the guidance and good thoughts they can offer."

"Does this mean you no longer consider us a threat?" Ashok asked.

"Then why doesn't she order her guards to step away?" Skagi muttered. He held the door slightly ajar to keep an eye on the men outside.

"You are all dangerous. If I thought you were a threat to me or to that child"—she looked at the girl, Elina, and her eyes softened with affection—"I would have had you all killed. But I also let my anger rule me for a time. I won't let that happen again. Why did you come here?"

"You saw the reason," Ilvani said. "You saw her in my mind."

"Yes," Agny said. Her eyes looked haunted. She held her hands clasped tightly in her lap. "But I want to hear the tale from your lips. I want to know how much you understand about what is happening."

Ashok said, "The woman in Ilvani's dreams asked for her help. Some force threatens her, hurts her, and in turn hurts Ilvani. She has the scars to prove it. They were what led us to Rashemen."

"May I see them?" Agny said. "These scars?"

Ilvani shifted closer to the fire. The child followed her. She pulled up her right sleeve to reveal the Rashemi language carved into her flesh. Agny examined the symbols in the flickering light and traced one gently with her fingernail.

"You carved these without knowing our language?" she asked.

"I know your language now," Ilvani said. "It soaks my tongue."

Agny looked at the witch sharply. "Prove it."

Ilvani spoke in a language Ashok didn't understand. Agny showed no reaction, but Ashok thought she was agitated when she motioned Ilvani to roll down her sleeve.

"It's a prayer, if you're curious," Agny said. "Yaraella's call to the spirits for blessing and protection."

"Her call has gone beyond Ilvani," Ashok said. "Through her, the spirits of the Shadowfell are being driven mad. The same thing is happening here, isn't it?" he pressed.

"We saw the withered crops," Cree said, "and the dead horse."

"Don't forget that our caravan barely made it through the mountains," Skagi said from the door. "All the nastiest beasts were following our witch. If one of yours is behind it, I'll thank you to tell her to stop."

"You are correct. We have seen the same signs and portents in our lands, but the link that caused the disturbances is not as strong," Agny said. "It draws no monsters to us. It only maddens our livestock and withers our crops. But that is damage enough."

"The child," Ilvani said. "Yaraella's offspring is the link."

Agny nodded. "So the spirits are not at rest because some evil force threatens Yaraella's spirit. She's reaching out to



our world for aid, through her daughter and through you,” she said to Ilvani. “The three of you are connected. Across the length of Faerûn, you feel one another’s pain.”

“But why Ilvani?” Ashok said. “Why didn’t Yaraella reach out to one of the wychlaran instead of a stranger, one not even of her own race?”

“I couldn’t say, but in life Yaraella kept herself isolated from her people,” Agny said. “After her husband’s death in battle, we reached out to her, tried to convince her to join the wychlaran. Her connection to the spirit world was deeper and more intense than that of any witch I’d ever seen. She received no training to hone her gifts. Her power came as naturally as breath to her. Sometimes she was able to use it to predict the future.”

Ashok and Cree exchanged a glance, though neither spoke. “What happened to her?” Ashok asked.

“Power such as Yaraella’s had taken its toll on the spirit. Living eyes were not meant to see all the things she had seen. The forces of death, the gods, and other worlds—it’s a heavy burden, especially for one so young and inexperienced. Yaraella chose not to join the wychlaran—she preferred to stay with her daughter here, in the home where she was born—but the hathran Sree was helping her to cope with the visions and the spirits that reached out to communicate with her.”

In the firelight, Agny’s eyes looked sad. “I thought Sree would be able to change her mind. Many of us believed Yaraella would eventually become an *othlor*, a ‘true one’ we call them. They are the wisest and most powerful wychlaran, and their connection to the Feywild is strong.”

“The Feywild,” Ashok said. The name evoked a memory, his father teaching him about the mirror world, Faerûn, and its peoples. He’d spoken of the Feywild as a world existing alongside Faerûn in much the same way the Shadowfell did. Where the Shadowfell was a twisted world of darkness, the

Feywild reflected an idyllic landscape. Ashok remembered his father speaking of the place with disdain.

"Though she is a fine teacher, Sree's efforts came too late, I'm afraid," Agny said, her voice heavy with emotion. "Yaraella's visions drove her mad, and a little over a month ago she took her own life."

Agny reached out to stroke Elina's hair as she said this, but the child was too absorbed with Ilvani. She paid no attention to their talk.

"Death hasn't brought her peace," Ashok said. "She still clings to the world she wanted to leave."

As he spoke, Ashok heard the words of his father echo mockingly in his head. He remembered the shadows that clung to him as he hung by chains in the caves of Ikemmu.

*No god calls them home*, his father said.

You're wrong, Father—Yaraella has a goddess, Ashok thought. Why didn't Bhalla, the witches' goddess, come to take her servant? Wasn't she good enough, powerful enough, to serve Her? Didn't Bhalla care about her children?

"The storm," Ilvani said, breaking into Ashok's dark thoughts. "She's afraid of it. It chases her wherever she goes."

"The storm is part of the dream," Agny reasoned. "It masks the true threat."

Ashok felt himself growing impatient. "Which is?"

Agny shrugged. "It could be anything—an entity of the Shadowfell perhaps, or a telthor. Perhaps Yaraella displeased a spirit that was trying to communicate with her when she took her life. Her death severed its link to this world. If so, it may have decided to punish Yaraella by preventing her from passing beyond the realm of shadows to Bhalla's side."

"Ilvani's connection to the Shadowfell makes her vulnerable to both Yaraella and whatever threatens her," Ashok said.

"Not only that," Agny said. She regarded Ilvani in the wavering light. "I see a bit of her when I look at you. The

expression in your eyes—you exist only partly in this world. None of us here can fully comprehend what you see when you take in this room, or the lake outside, and the village. You are like Yaraella's mirror in the shadow world. Because of this, I am not surprised her spirit sought yours when she was in turmoil. You were the only one who might share her pain."

"She's sharing it," Skagi said, "but it's getting people killed."

"Blunt as usual, Brother," Cree said. "But he's right. I lost an eye to whatever force is causing this. We've lost friends, good warriors—we're going to stop it."

"And you intend to use weapons to fight this evil?" Agny said. Dark amusement crept into her voice.

"They brought us this far," Cree said. "What has your magic done but keep people locked in their homes or driven them away?"

"You said yourself the link to Yaraella is stronger in Ilvani than Elina," Ashok said. "There has to be a way we can use that. If she's reaching out for help, why can't we answer?"

Agny considered. "What you suggest is not beyond wychlaran abilities, but we do not involve outsiders in our sacred rituals. Ilvani's presence may corrupt the connection instead of strengthen it."

Ashok saw Cree bristle at the insult, but Ilvani didn't react. She looked weary through the eyes, and the presence of the child clearly unnerved her. Ashok couldn't get over how the girl looked at Ilvani, for all the world as if she were her mother.

"I don't know that we have any other choice," Ashok said. "If we move on, if the child leaves the village, you might find peace again, but Elina and Ilvani never will until Yaraella's spirit is freed from whatever threatens her."

"You speak reasonably for a member of your race," Agny said, "and you're right. For Elina's sake, and for the memory of Yaraella, my sisters and I must act. But it will take time to gather them here." She stood up. "You may remain here

under the protection of Reina until the ritual is ready. She will teach Ilvani her part in it."

"And she'll be keeping an eye on the rest of us to make sure we don't do anything mean," Skagi said with a chuckle.

"We won't," Cree said, "as long as your warriors keep their weapons sheathed as well."

"The berserkers of the Snow Cat lodge will watch," Agny said, "nothing more, unless I order it."

"What about this?" Ilvani said. She gestured to the child still attached to her. "It's not safe around me. I want it to be gone."

Agny took up a stool from the corner of the room, picked Elina up, and sat her upon it. "Elina, you know that this woman is not your mother. She's not Yaraella."

The little girl looked from Ilvani to the masked woman. Reluctantly, she nodded.

"That's right. Even though she might feel the same, she's not like us. You must let her be. Do you understand?"

Another nod.

"Good girl. Wait here for me, please."

Agny plucked the girl off the stool and placed her before the fire. She led Ashok, Ilvani, and the brothers out into the cold night air. The guards dispersed at her word, but Reina and the other witch, Sree, remained.

"See to their needs, Reina," Agny said. She laid her hand on Sree's arm. The witch stared at Ilvani as if she were some sort of demon. "Come, Sister, we must speak."

"Is it true?" Sree whispered the question to Agny, but Ashok heard her. "Is Yaraella connected to the shadar-kai witch?"

"She is," Agny said, "and it seems I was wrong. These soulless ones may hold the key to saving hers."



That night they slept in Reina's home. Restless, Ashok woke many times in the night, and he, Skagi, and Cree took

turns on watch, even though the healer—ethran, they called her—assured them it was unnecessary.

Near dawn, Ashok sat at a table near the fire. He heard Skagi and Cree stir and rise, but Ilvani slept on. She'd had no nightmares that Ashok could tell, but she'd lain awake a long time, silently staring at the ceiling. Ashok didn't speak to her. He didn't want to disturb her, but he would have given much to know her thoughts. Was she afraid of the ritual? Ashok couldn't blame her. Their ignorance of the witches and their magic assured they'd be walking into the ritual blind, trusting only in Agny's word to protect them.

Cree and Skagi came quietly into the front room. Cree nodded toward the two small bedchambers off the main room. Ashok and the brothers had shared one, Ilvani and Reina, the other. "The healer is talking to Ilvani about something," he said. "I heard muffled voices but couldn't make out what they were saying."

"Hopefully she'll share something about the ritual," Ashok said.

Skagi grunted. "Ask me, let them handle their dead witch's problems on their own. They don't want us here, so we'll go."

"That won't make Ilvani's nightmares go away," Cree said.

"I know that," Skagi muttered. He fiddled with his falchion hilt, half drawing the weapon from its scabbard. "I just don't like being idle. We've come a long way just to sit and wait on the witches to solve this mystery of who we're fighting."

"The force that threatens Yaraella—it must be powerful," Cree said. "Would they tell us if they knew what it was?"

"I don't know, but they'd be foolish not to prepare us," Ashok said. Mimicking Skagi, he took out his own weapon, just to have something to do with his hands. Though stained and knicked all over, the spikes still bore signs of the magic the blacksmith had placed on it.

For the first time since he'd left the city, Ashok found himself missing Ikemmu. After eight months, he'd grown

confident in his surroundings, his understanding of the place, and his role in the city. He felt ill at ease in Rashemen.

"We should train," Cree said. "Look at us. We need a fight, to shake off our uncertainties, if nothing else."

"Will the guards let us?" Skagi asked.

"Agný said we have the freedom of the village," Ashok said. His mouth twisted in a smile. "I doubt she'll mind us trying to cut each other up."

"Who's cutting me up?" Skagi said, raising a hand to his ear as if he'd gone deaf. "Did I hear a challenge in those words?"

"You did," Ashok said. "Though how you could hear anything over the sound of your own bellows ..."

"Oh, it *was* a challenge," Skagi said. "Outside, pup. You're getting too cocky, but don't worry, we'll cure you of it. We just need to get you down on the ground, picking dirt out of your teeth. Fix you right up."

The easy banter distracted and comforted Ashok for a time. He trained with Skagi and Cree for hours, until his muscles were on fire and his hands throbbed from the stinging vibration of metal on metal every time their weapons came together. He stopped later only to check on the nightmare stabled behind Reina's hut.

He saw the healer had been near the nightmare's stall recently. She'd drawn a circle in the dirt around it and lined the outside with symbols. Bundles of sticks tied with heather were placed at four points around the circle. Ashok saw smoke rising from three of the bundles. The fourth was a blackened lump, the twigs nearly consumed by fire.

The nightmare stood at ease within the circle. Only his smoldering eyes betrayed his rage at the indignity of being kept like a common stable horse. Ashok felt the hate coursing through the stallion. He recognized the emotions as being separate from his own, but he felt them no less strongly for having that knowledge.

A soft gasp made Ashok spin, his hand on his chain. He relaxed when he saw the other masked witch, Sree, standing at the stable door. The shallow light filtering behind her made her appear a walking shadow. Her mask obscured all emotion, and Ashok could not see her eyes. It unsettled him, the idea that he would never know, when these witches approached, if they meant him peace or harm.

"I didn't mean to disturb you," Sree said. Ashok detected no threat in her voice, only calm strength tinged with curiosity. "I came to reinforce the circle. It seems I'm just in time."

"He won't hurt anyone," Ashok said. "That's not what he's here for."

The witch chuckled softly and without humor. "Listen to your words. Its presence harms all who come near it. What if a child wandered in here and found the protective circle broken? What if your beast chose that moment to vent its hatred with a scream?"

The truth of the rebuke pierced Ashok. "Forgive me, I—"

The witch held up a hand. "We need not talk of forgiveness. Let me offer you a warning instead. I see the connection between you and this creature, like a black thread that joins you breast to breast. The longer you stay together, the thicker the strand will grow. You already sense it, don't you?" she said, reading his expression.

Ashok nodded. "I feel what he feels. Sometimes it's as if I can read his thoughts."

"Don't be alarmed by this," Sree said, "for it can work in your favor, if you allow it."

"How?"

"Just as you feel its hatred and rage—and are sometimes infected by it—so too can it feel the emotions in your heart. When you show mercy and compassion, it forces the nightmare to experience the same feelings. You can use them to influence him."

It made sense, and it explained how, out on the Shadowfell plain, the nightmare had been able to shake off the effects of the madness. He had Ashok's emotions to draw upon to bring him back to sanity.

"But he can also influence me," Ashok said, "can't he?"

"Yes," Sree said. "That is why I warn you—the longer you allow this evil thing to be your companion, the more it becomes part of you. Or maybe I am misguided in my warnings? Maybe that is what you want?"

"No," Ashok said. "I don't, but I'm afraid it might be the only way."

Sree chuckled again. "You do have the air of inevitability about you, shadow man." She bent and whispered a prayer over the blackened twigs, then threw them in a corner. She laid a fresh bundle in their place and continued around the circle, praying and strengthening the offerings. The smoke rising from the twigs gradually dissipated.

"Agný told me you were training Yaraella to cope with her gifts," Ashok said. "She said you were a skilled teacher. Does that mean you're close to the spirit world as well?"

"My sister hathran speaks too highly of me," Sree said, but Ashok could tell by her tone she was pleased at the praise. "My gifts are nothing like Yaraella's were. Yet I am known among my sisters for having much patience and control. There is very little in this world or the spirit realm that surprises or frightens me."

"Except Ilvani," Ashok said.

The hathran's eyes widened behind her mask. "You're mistaken," she said sharply. "I don't fear your witch, shadow man, and you're impertinent to say so."

Ashok shrugged. "I saw the way you looked at her. Something about her unsettles you, whether you admit it or not."

Sree walked around the circle again to check it, but Ashok thought she was stalling. Her movements had an edge of



anger. All the while, the nightmare watched them both, his red eyes speculative.

Sree sighed and said, "You're right. She does disturb me. She's too much like Yaraella. I never thought I would see another with her power, unless Elina grows up to share her gifts. Surely she is an oddity among your people?"

"She—" Ashok hesitated. "Yes. We don't always understand her. On our journey, Ilvani said she kept seeing owls. I saw her look at the sky so many times, but there was never anything there."

Sree's eyes softened. Ashok imagined she might be smiling behind the mask. "Remarkable. A rare breed of brown owl used to inhabit the pinewoods in this area. I'd nearly forgotten. They had all died out by the time I was born. My mother used to collect their feathers, which were often used as quills. Sadly, many of the quills remain, even though all the owls are gone."

Her words triggered a memory in Ashok's mind—the day he'd taken Ilvani to Darnae's shop. "That's what she said." He spoke half to himself. "Ilvani looked at Darnae's quill racks and told her the owls were all gone." Ashok hadn't understood a word of it, but Darnae had. She'd understood Ilvani after knowing her for only a few minutes. Ashok had known her for months and hadn't gotten as far.

Ashok felt suddenly so useless. He tried to recall everything Ilvani had ever said to him. He'd been so arrogant to think that her words were meaningless, when all the time there was truth in them that he'd just been too blind to see.

"Some in Ikemmu call her the mad witch," Ashok said, remembering Skagi's words when they'd rescued Ilvani from Ashok's enclave. "Some call her a prophet."

"What do you call her?" Sree asked curiously.

"Neither," Ashok said.

"That's for the best. It means she can turn to you," Sree said. "We all turn to the people who see us most clearly."

“I’ve done little enough for her on that score,” Ashok said, “but I’ll do everything I can to protect her from Yaraella’s monster during the ritual. Nothing will harm her if I can prevent it.”

“Bold words,” Sree said. “You should have faith in her god and ours to watch over this endeavor.”

Ashok laughed without humor. “You ask for the one thing I can’t give,” he said. “Why should we trust Tempus and Bhalla to favor us? What have they done thus far to ensure Ilvani’s safety or Yaraella’s peace? Your witch took her life because she couldn’t bear her gifts. Mine has lived through a hell that would break lesser men. You say they’re close to the spirit realm—that makes them closer to their gods than all of us.” Ashok was aware of his voice rising, but he couldn’t stop the words or the anger. “Tell me, who is more deserving of protection than they? Yet here we sit, you and I, whole and sane”—he laughed again bitterly—“or at least as sane as can be expected, while the ones we care about die or lose pieces of themselves. What can we truly expect from the gods?”

“Nothing,” Sree said simply.

“A poor answer,” Ashok said, his tone sullen.

“A true answer,” Sree corrected him. “It’s not for us to know the gods’ will. Human or shadar-kai—all we can do is live our lives, make the best choices we can, and accept that we can’t control everything.”

“If that’s all, why do I need Tempus?” Ashok said.

“Don’t mistake me for a spiritual guide,” Sree said. “You’ll have to work out your faith—or lack of it—by yourself.” She looked at him for a long time in thoughtful silence. “But if you’re determined to protect Ilvani in her god’s place, I may be able to help you,” she said. “You can’t join in our ritual directly, but when the time comes, speak to me again, and I will show you a way you can watch over Ilvani, if you wish.”

Her gesture of trust surprised Ashok. “I do. You have my thanks,” he said.

She chuckled. "You thank me for offering you the chance to risk your life meddling with death and dangerous magic. It's true what folk say of the shadar-kai, isn't it? You chase pain with mad smiles on your faces."

"For the sake of my city and my companions—always," Ashok said.



Ashok left the nightmare secure in the protective circle. Not far away, Skagi and Cree were still sparring, and Ashok noticed their battles had attracted a small audience of Rashemi berserkers. A part of him wanted to join them, to challenge the berserkers to a match, but instead he found himself walking off toward the pinewoods behind Reina's hut.

He walked until the sound of voices and the ring of steel faded to a dim song in the back of his mind. He held his chain in his hands and put his back against one of the immense pines. The perpetual cold and silence plucked at his spirit, but Ashok pushed back against the oppressive feeling.

Looking up into the trees, Ashok tried to imagine Ilvani's owls. He squinted into the dim sunlight until his vision blurred, but even then, the phantoms did not appear.

"You showed me the Tuigan soldier," Ashok said. His anger rekindled. "I did what you wanted. The least you can do is show me her owls."

He pushed off the tree and wandered in an aimless circle, unsure how to proceed. If Uwan were here, he would know.

"Tempus," he said abruptly, and stopped, half-shocked to hear the god's name come from his lips. He couldn't take it back, so he hurried on, speaking through his anger. "If you know her at all, you know what's at stake. Help her survive this ordeal. Let her find peace. She's given up too much already. I'll do what I can, but remember, I'm not doing it for you. It's only for her."

He put his chain back on his belt and left the wood. He was almost to the path that led up to Reina's door when he heard a rustle in the trees. He spun, his hand on his weapon. A shower of pine needles littered the spot where he'd been standing a breath ago. The sunlight flashed in his eyes, momentarily blinding him, but in that instant Ashok thought he saw wings silhouetted against the sun. When he blinked his vision clear, he saw nothing, no bird in the sky.

The pine needles were still there.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE FOLLOWING DAY, THREE MORE MASKED WITCHES ARRIVED in Tinnir. Soon afterward, Agny came to tell them that the ritual would take place that evening. They had the day to prepare themselves.

Ashok went to see Sree a few hours before the ritual was to begin. He noticed on his way to Reina's hut that the Rashemi berserkers gathered at the edge of the lake with the newly arrived witches. They were constructing a large raft by lashing wood planks together. The wood looked as if it had come from newly felled trees. The witches carved into the planks complex symbols similar to those Ilvani bore on her arms, readying them for the ritual, which would take place near the center of the lake. Apparently, Agny's power was strongest on the water.

The masked women stared at Ashok as he passed, and one of them made a gesture like a ward in the air.

Sree saw him coming. She opened the door to the hut and beckoned him inside.

Herbs covered her kitchen table, staining it green and yellow. A small pot boiled over the fire, releasing fragrant vapors into the air. Ashok drew in the scent, but he didn't recognize any of the herbs.

"Agny told me to warn you," Sree said, "that when the warriors felled the trees for the ritual, they noticed a disturbance in the forest."

"What kind of disturbance?" Ashok asked.

"A pair of treants—powerful fey spirits—inhabit the evergreen woods around Tinnir," Sree explained. "Long ago our people named the larger one Tallmarrow and the smaller one Needle. They've protected this area for many years and have counseled the wychlaran. We made offerings, and the warriors showed the utmost care when they brought down the trees, but I'm afraid the influence of Ilvani and Elina here

together in the village has affected even their ancient minds.”

“You think they’re going to seek revenge for you taking the trees?” Ashok said.

“Yes, and if they disrupt the ritual, the witches and Ilvani might perish,” Sree said.

“They have to cross the lake,” Ashok said. “We won’t let them get to you.”

Sree nodded. “Once the ritual begins, drink this potion down.” She took the lid off the pot and placed it on the hearth. Dipping a metal ladle into the boiling liquid, she poured a small amount into a metal vial. She stoppered it and handed it to Ashok.

The vial warmed his hands. Ashok held it between his palms and nodded his thanks. “How will I know if it’s worked?”

“You’ll know,” Sree said. “Whatever force threatens Ilvani, you’ll see it first, even if it’s invisible to the warriors around you.”

“I owe you a debt,” Ashok said.

Sree shook her head. She walked to the door and opened it. A rare parting in the clouds revealed a blazing sunset over the lake. Orange and purple rays struck the surface of the water and created a tapestry of moving color.

“Bhalla blesses us,” Sree said. “You should walk, shadow man, and enjoy this evening. How many like this can you claim in your lifetime?”

“None,” Ashok said. He stepped outside and let the rays turn his scarred flesh gold.



Ilvani walked with Reina along the lakeshore as the Rashemi warriors placed the finished raft on the dock. The ethran led her over to the raft and pointed at the symbols carved into the wooden planks.

“These hands on the outer edges are the hearts and minds of the villagers. The carvings bear drops of their blood, freely spilled for us. Their strength will protect us from any current that might upset the raft,” she said. “We won’t feel the motion of the water at all.” She pointed to an inner circle composed of mountain peaks and flames. “Sree’s work. Her magic will keep us anchored to our homes and our land, so none of us will go astray in the spirit realm.”

Ilvani looked at the innermost circle, composed of swirling lines. “What protection is that?”

“Agy’s,” Reina said, “and mine. We are the summoners—we will speak to Yaraella first and thus attract the attention of the evil that hunts her. Agy’s power is strongest on the water, so on water we stand. I also buried herbs in the symbols to represent the power of earth. The three of us are connected. We will face the evil without fear, as you must.”

Ilvani saw how it might go, with all the witches and their places in the circle. She saw her own spot in the center, a protected space marked with a dark carved slash like a tearing shadow. Next to it, a similar space bore a carving of a heather flower. Ilvani’s eyes narrowed.

“What is that?” she demanded, pointing to the flower.

Reina’s eyes clouded. “Elina’s place,” she said. “At Agy’s command, she will join the circle.”

“Why?”

“Why should it matter to you?” Reina said, sounding surprised. “The child is not your concern.”

“The child looks at me and sees its mother,” Ilvani said.

“I know,” Reina said. “The two of you will provide the strongest link to Yaraella.”

She still doesn’t understand, Ilvani thought. If the child dies, in her last moments she’ll look to me to protect her. She looked at her hands, those useless appendages that always failed her. She did not want to have to watch the child’s soul slip through her fingers, but she didn’t tell Reina that. The ethran would never understand, Ilvani thought

bitterly, how a soulless one could know so much about the spirits.

Ilvani left Reina at the dock to wait for the other witches and wandered along the shoreline to watch the blazing sunset. Ashok emerged from a stand of pines a few feet away. They saw each other at almost the same time.

Ashok came to stand beside her at the edge of the water. They watched silently as the Rashemi put the raft in the icy water. Ilvani recognized the tension in the set of Ashok's shoulders. It was almost time for the ritual to begin.

"Sree believes there could be an attack during the ritual," Ashok said. "A pair of treants."

Ilvani closed her eyes and stretched out tentatively with her awareness. She sought restless spirits, but she didn't want to get too close. She didn't want to risk them lashing out at her.

Her awareness met an angry wall in the depths of the pinewoods. Ilvani recoiled from it and drew into herself protectively. When she opened her eyes, Ashok was watching her carefully.

"Did you see them?" he asked.

"In the forest," Ilvani said. "I felt rage, pain, and madness. They're coming."

"Skagi, Cree, and I will be nearby," Ashok said. "We won't let them get to the raft."

Ilvani said nothing. She thought if it came to it, Ashok would use the nightmare to burn the trees and perhaps the rest of the forest. Then the Rashemi would turn on them. Ilvani didn't need prophecies from Tempus to tell her that the berserker warriors with their superior numbers would slaughter them all.

"Leave the flame in its circle," she said. "It won't help you this time. It will only anger them."

"What do you mean?" Ashok said, but then understanding lit his features. "You don't want me to bring the nightmare out of the stables?"



“No matter what,” Ilvani said. “Give me your oath.”

Ashok looked unhappy, but he nodded. “You have it. I won’t use the nightmare for the battle.”

“What—not use the pony?” Skagi’s voice came from behind them. Ilvani and Ashok turned to see the brothers approaching the shoreline together. Cree’s vacant eye socket with its serpent tattoo drew Ilvani’s gaze, but the warrior was looking at Ashok.

“Ilvani says the Rashemi won’t appreciate having the nightmare here,” Ashok said.

“Afraid to get singed, are they?” Skagi laughed. “Fine, then. We don’t need the beast or the Rashemi, not after the ice trolls.”

“And the brigands,” Cree added. “Don’t forget the winter wolves, either. What will you conjure up for us on the journey home, Ilvani?”

Ilvani said nothing. She couldn’t look away from Cree’s missing eye. The serpent had taken it. Why had she gone walking in the caves that day? She didn’t remember what impulse had led her to the pens, but if she hadn’t gone, the shadow serpents would never have gone mad. She imagined Cree’s eye in its proper place, his face as it was—whole—but she couldn’t picture it. His face was as it was. She couldn’t see him any other way.

The silence stretched, and Cree finally realized that she was not ignoring him—he saw where her gaze rested. His lighthearted expression changed, becoming sober.

“I jested, Ilvani,” he said. He pointed to the serpent tattoo and the empty socket. “This wasn’t your doing.”

“Yes, it was,” Ilvani said. She let the other worlds intrude too much. She let the snow rabbit invade her mind and mark her body. If they were to survive, if she wanted to exist fully in this world, Ilvani knew she would have to find a way to silence the voices, the shadows that invaded her thoughts and dreams. She felt lost. She’d never before asked for help from anyone.

If Natan were alive, she would have asked her brother for guidance. She'd waited too long to find the words. Now Natan was dead, and she had to find her own way.

"After tonight, your link to Yaraella will be severed," Ashok put in. "The journey home will be much less eventful."

Skagi groaned. "So we can look forward to the witch blasting us with black lightning every few miles, is that it?" He leaned toward Ilvani conspiratorially. "I'd rather have the monsters. Can't you bring just a few into our path?"

They jested to put her at ease. Ilvani had never experienced this type of companionship. She saw it when the brothers bantered with Ashok as well, the ease of their friendship, the way they fought side by side. They became more and more as one every day they were together, but Ashok was the center of it all. He was the link that bound them.

The more he grows, the more shadar-kai will look to him to lead, Ilvani thought. The bonds between those here were strong, but the brothers didn't realize how weak Ashok was without them. What will happen if that link is severed?

He will be tested, Ilvani realized with a shuddering clarity. His will against the shadows. Natan had seen a prophecy with Ashok and Ikemmu at its center. Ilvani saw something quite different looming, a shrouded future brimming with uncertainties.

She pushed the speculations aside. They would not serve her or Ashok now. Not until she was whole again, with Yaraella released from her, could she help him.

"The nightmare stays in the stables," Ashok was saying. "We'll have to fight this battle ourselves and trust in Rashemi aid."

"They don't trust us," Cree said. "Most of them look at us like we're ghosts. They ignore us."

"It's because we're prettier than they are," Skagi said, snickering. "Makes them nervous."

Ilvani focused on the words and let their bantering distract her from her dark thoughts. The sun descended into the cloud-filled horizon, and the colors bled from the surface of the lake.

The wychlaran came with the darkness.

Masked and swaddled in brown cloaks and hoods, the witches walked single file onto the dock and stood facing the Rashemi berserkers. One by one, the warriors lit torches and stood them on ice patches at the shore of the lake.

Agny in her mask of water carvings raised her arms and made a sweeping gesture toward the torches. Water surged up around them and formed an icy wall to trap the flames. The cold should have extinguished the torches, but Ilvani noticed Sree had also raised her hands, and the flames answered her call, flaring brightly against the ice.

The entire portion of the lake the witches occupied was now illuminated. The Rashemi berserkers stepped into the shadows and turned to face any threats that might approach the lake. Ashok and the brothers went to join them.

Ilvani turned and met Ashok's gaze before he left her. He nodded once, but he didn't speak. She turned and joined the witches on the dock.

Agny went first, and one by one, the wychlaran stepped onto the raft. The ethran Reina led Elina by the hand. Ilvani came last and took up her place in the ritual circle next to the child.

She felt the power already. The symbols carved into the raft held their own magic, but the circle was wider than just their small craft. Lake Tirulag itself boiled with the ancient powers of the living and the spirit world. Ilvani felt the arms reaching up from the lake, the silent cries of the telthors.

Above her, the sky was full of bright, shardlike stars, eclipsed only by the owl's wings as it circled the ritual ground. Ilvani traced the path of its flight and didn't realize until a breath later that the witches had begun a chant.

They'd joined hands, trapping Ilvani and Elina within the circle.

Ilvani knew her part now. She kneeled before the witches—Elina sat with her knees tucked up to her chin—and reached over to lay her hand on the child's arm.

"The connection is sealed," Agny said. "We will not leave this circle until our task is complete, or until death takes us."

"The circle is complete," the witches echoed.

"The circle holds me," Ilvani murmured. Power surged through her limbs, the combined strength and magic of the wychlaran. She gasped. Agny, Sree, and the rest were suddenly in her thoughts and she in theirs. The whispers were deafening; she couldn't tell one voice from another or hear her own thoughts in the barrage of sounds and secrets.

Throwing her head back, Ilvani sucked in the cold night air and watched the stars whirl above her. The owl soared high and called out to her, but she couldn't answer him. The wychlaran chants grew louder. All the barriers, not just those erected in her mind, were breaking down.

The Veil, Ilvani thought. The Veil between the worlds dissolves in this small, protected space. She had no choice but to walk the dark roads with these unfamiliar women and pray that they did not intend her death.

The last sound Ilvani heard before oblivion was the sound of trees ripping themselves from the earth.



In the darkness, and with only one eye, Cree still saw them first. He waved his katar to get the others' attention and pointed to the darkness beyond the ice-encased torches. The swaying motion of the trees wasn't caused by the wind, but by a spirit walking the earth on two legs, thick gnarled trunks covered in ice and pine needles woven like sinew. The weight of the tallest branches bent the treant over so that it walked stooped, its branches dragging the ground and picking up snow and dirt.

“They’re bigger than I thought,” Cree told his brother, who stood beside him.

“I still think burning them is the best way,” Skagi said. “What do you think, Ashok?”

When Ashok didn’t reply, Cree turned to look at him. Ashok stared out over the lake, watching the ritual. He held a small metal vial in his left hand. It was empty. He wiped his mouth and threw the vial in the water.

“Are you ready, Ashok?” Cree asked. He didn’t know what had been in the vial—perhaps a healing draught given to him by the witches. Many of Ashok’s wounds in the fight with the winter wolves had been slow to heal.

“I’m ready,” Ashok said. He braided his chain around his hands and stood beside Skagi.

The second treant, the smaller Needle, came behind its older mate. Its legs were more spindly and fragile-looking. Cree thought one good slice with his katar would drop the creature. He waited for the Rashemi berserkers to act first, but the warriors didn’t move. They simply stood their ground by the lake, blocking the path to the witches’ raft.

“What are they doing?” Skagi hissed. “Are we going to fight them or aren’t we?”

One of the warriors stepped forward, and to Cree’s surprise, held up his hand in a formal greeting as the fey creatures approached.

“We beg you, children of the pinewood, to turn back,” he said. “Accept our offerings of peace. We mean you no harm this night.”

Skagi cursed under his breath. He shifted his falchion from hand to hand. Cree shared his brother’s impatience. He’d never encountered a treant before, but he knew how the creatures would behave in Ilvani’s presence. They would not listen to reason.

“Please, spirits, turn back,” the warrior said. The larger treant was almost upon him.

“Get back, you fool!” Cree shouted, but his warning came too late. The treant swept its needle-thin upper branches down and impaled the warrior through the chest.

“Looks like they’re not in the mood to talk,” Skagi said. “Eh, Ashok?”

Skagi cursed again, but this time there was true fear in his voice. Cree turned just in time to see Ashok collapse on the lakeshore.

“Cover me!” Cree shouted to his brother. He kneeled next to Ashok as the berserker warriors ran up to flank their fallen comrade and fight the treants. Skagi positioned himself in front of them.

“Looks like the whole damned forest is moving out there,” Skagi said. “Tell Ashok this is no time for sleeping.”

Cree bent over Ashok’s chest, his ear pressed against his breast to listen for a heartbeat. He sat back, stunned. Distantly, he heard a sound like dozens of trees ripped from the earth by their roots. More of the pine trees stirred to life and moved toward the lake. He tried to speak but couldn’t.

Skagi turned, saw his face, and barked, “What is it? What’s wrong with him? Tell me, godsdamnit!”

“He’s dead,” Cree said.



Ashok stood on the battlefield and waited for the treants to come to him. Something didn’t feel right. The sky was immense, the light of the stars so bright, it looked like daylight. He looked around, but the Rashemi berserkers were gone. So were Skagi and Cree.

Dread washed over Ashok. He turned to face the lake. The raft was empty except for a single figure huddled in a brown cloak. Her back was to Ashok. He couldn’t tell the figure’s identity.

Gripping his chain, Ashok walked out onto the dock. “Where is everyone? What’s happened out there?” he shouted. The figure didn’t move. When he looked down at

his feet, Ashok realized that the dock had vanished. He walked suspended upon the water's surface.

The vial. The sky was too big, the stars too bright—he'd crossed over into some other realm, the place of the ritual. If that was true, where were the other wychlaran and Ilvani?

He hurried across the water to the raft. When he stepped onto the edge, the craft rocked ever so slightly, and the figure whirled to face him.

Ashok didn't recognize the woman at first. Beneath her cloak hood, she wore no mask. He'd grown used to identifying the witches by the markings on their masks, and it was only when he looked at the woman's eyes that he felt the flash of familiarity.

"Sree," he said, "where are we?"

The witch's eyes widened when she looked at him. Now that her face lay bare before him, Ashok easily read the fear and confusion in her expression.

"This isn't right," she said.

Dread turned to panic inside Ashok. "Where are the others?" he demanded.

"Dead," she said.

"What?" he cried.

Her expression hardened then, and Sree drew a curved knife from her belt. "You. You're supposed to be dead," she said, and came at him with the brandished knife.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

ON THE LAKESHORE, CREE FENDED OFF A SWIPE FROM ONE of the animated trees. As far as he could tell, the treants directed the whole forest to attack them, but the animated creatures looked very different from the pines they'd walked among earlier that day. They were taller than man height, their branches and needles twisted and bent to assume a vaguely human shape. Their knobby heads had no eyes or mouths, yet they descended upon the Rashemi in swarms, rough limbs tearing through the warriors' armor and clawing at their eyes.

"Careful, Brother," Cree said as he sliced off one of the stabbing limbs before it could land a blow to Skagi's face. "We can't afford to lose any more eyes between us."

"Just keep them back," Skagi snarled at him, "and check him again."

"I tell you, he's gone," Cree said. He went down on one knee under two of the flailing creatures, but Skagi hacked them away with his falchion. "We need to fall back to a more defensible position, or they're going to overwhelm us."

"I'm not leaving him." Skagi stomped on the animated tree when it fell and hacked at its limbs until it lay in pieces on the ground. "Damn the witches, but I'll set the whole place on fire before I leave his body to them."

Cree glanced at Ashok, who still lay prone on the lakeshore. The other Rashemi fought the animated trees, but the treants were breaking through their lines toward the water.

"The torches," Cree said. "If we can free them from the ice —"

"I already tried," Skagi said, "while you were trying to revive him. The ice is like stone. I can't get to the flame."

"The witches didn't take any chances," Cree muttered. He glanced out to the lake. The circle of masked women



huddled together. Their chants rose to the night sky. He couldn't see Ilvani or the child in their midst. He glanced back at Ashok's body. "They must have done something to him."

"But why—" Skagi roared in pain as one of the tree spirits raked its branches across his back. He dropped to the ground and squashed the creature beneath him until its wood talons released him. He rolled to one side and let Cree hack the thing to pieces before it could rise up again.

"I don't know," Cree said. "It makes no sense. Why would they slay one of their own defenders?"

"Godsdamnit!" Skagi batted aside another of the clawing spirits. "Take me back to the Shadowdark and give me a worthy opponent, not a stick!"

"We have to fall back," Cree said. "Help me carry him."

Skagi waved his falchion to push the swarm back long enough to give them an opening. They hoisted Ashok's corpse between them and carried him to the dock where the Rashemi warriors gathered in a line.

"What are they doing?" Skagi cried.

Cree looked and saw that the gathered warriors had lowered their weapons. Low murmurs escaped their lips, as if they were praying for renewed strength.

"The gods may not be busy, but we could use aid," Cree shouted angrily. The warriors ignored him and continued their low chant.

"Ah well, time to wade in and choose our deaths, Brother," Skagi said. He twirled his falchion and spread his hands to welcome the approaching treants.

Cree clapped his brother on the shoulder and looked through his single eye at the mad onslaught of fey. The life flowing through him was like nothing he'd felt since the day they'd run through the caves of Ashok's enclave with death just a pace behind them.

"Tempus, remember Ashok," Cree prayed aloud. "He is the warrior, the beast tamer, the soul's path through the

shadows. He is the shadar-kai—and your servant, whether he knows it or not. Praise Tempus.”

“Praise Tempus,” Skagi echoed.

Their prayer ended, and at the same time, the Rashemi’s chant became screams.

Skagi and Cree turned to see the warriors in the full grip of their berserker rage. Their faces contorted, eyes unfocused, the Rashemi howled and attacked the rampaging spirits with renewed energy.

“Gods,” Cree murmured in awe as the sea of violence flowed past him and his brother.

Skagi grinned at him. “We might live through this after all.”



Ashok dodged Sree’s attack and held out his hands. The chain stretched between his fists blocked the dagger blade. He twisted and wrenched the weapon from her hands. It landed in the water and sank. Both of them stared at where the weapon had been, too stunned to move. When Ashok finally looked at Sree, her face was a hard mask almost as unreadable as the wooden one.

“You tried to kill me,” Ashok said. He felt that surge of fear again. “You’re trying to disrupt the ritual. Why?”

“The ritual will continue,” Sree said. “No harm will come to my sisters or Elina.”

“It’s Ilvani,” Ashok said. He took a step forward, clutching the spiked chain until he felt blood on the metal. “You’re after her.”

“I would not have involved you,” Sree said, “but I couldn’t take the chance that you might see what was happening to her and try to intervene. I must destroy the link to Yaraella. It’s the only way to quell the telthors.”

“What about the ritual!” Ashok cried. “Your sisters are trying to do that—”

“They will fail,” Sree said.

"The wychlaran don't believe that," Ashok said. "Agy doesn't know you're acting on your own, does she? You're hiding something from all of them."

"Don't presume to know our ways, soulless one," Sree said. "You willingly put yourself in our power. Now I do what I must."

"It's Yaraella, isn't it?" Ashok said. "You don't want the wychlaran to communicate with her spirit. What will she tell them, Sree?"

The witch looked at him a long time. Resignation crept into her expression, and a guilt so profound it made him want to reach out to her, despite the risk of attack. Ashok could scarcely believe how easy it was to uncover her secrets, now that she no longer wore a mask.

They are so accustomed to having shields, Ashok thought, but this realm, wherever it is, stripped away all the barriers. She can't hide anymore.

"Yaraella will say that a monster hunts her in death," Sree said at last, "a monster I created."

"Yaraella didn't kill herself, did she?" Ashok said. "It was you."

"I loved Yaraella. I love her child. But she made a choice, and I had to make one too."

"You murdered her," Ashok said.

"You wouldn't understand because you are not of our people," Sree said. There was no derision in her tone this time. "This is a harsh land, surrounded by enemies who would see us annihilated or enslaved. The wychlaran are this land's only defense against that doom. It's our duty to defend our people. I tried to tell Yaraella this, but she never listened."

"She was in pain," Ashok said, remembering Ilvani's words that night when they'd laid the Tuigan spirit to rest. "Her burden—"

"Would have been eased by her sisters," Sree cried. "Our magic and guidance could have helped her cope with her

powers. We would not have left her alone with the voices of the spirits. Her bond with the spirit realm could have been a powerful tool to drive back the darkness, but she refused to use it in that way."

"So you killed her for it," Ashok said, "as punishment?" Her coldness stunned him.

"Not a punishment," Sree said, "but a means to an end. If Yaraella refused to help us, I knew there was another."

"You wanted Elina," Ashok said. "It was about her all along. You wanted her power."

"If I raise her, I can train her to be the link we need between this world and the spirit world," Sree said. The passion in her voice bordered on desperation. "Don't you see? Her gifts are too vital to waste."

"Are her gifts worth the cost?" Ashok asked. "How many have suffered because of your betrayal? Your sisters are risking their lives to correct your mistakes—"

"I didn't know the spirits would be angered!" For the first time, Sree's resolve faltered. Her voice shook. "I acted for the good of all."

"You spoke of trusting the gods, and all the while you played their part," Ashok said. "You stood before me, the hypocrite, asking me to have faith." He laughed at the futility of it all. "It's certain I have none left now."

It was Sree's turn to laugh at him. "Of course you do, soulless one. You scream as one of the faithful, rail at the gods for all the terrible things that happen to your loved ones, and you ask them to change fate. Tempus's hands are upon you, and now you want to guide His hands, but it doesn't work that way, mortal man. The gods do not exist to serve our vanity."

"Then we should be able to change our own fates," Ashok said. "To make the choices that—"

"Bring death and destruction upon us and those we love," Sree said. "Yes, Ashok, we all have a choice." Grief

constricted her features for a breath, but she shook it away in anger. "And most of the time, we choose wrongly."

"I'm sorry for your choices," Ashok said. "But you can end this now. Tell the others what you've done. Put your fate in their hands."

"They would kill me," Sree said. "I can accept that fate, but my work is not done. The child must be taught, protected. I knew Yaraella better than anyone. Her child loves me."

"The child doesn't know you killed her mother."

"Her mother squandered her gifts, and she was going to lead her child down the same path. The spirits speak to them. The telthors whispered secrets to Yaraella that they would tell no others. Do you know what that's worth?"

"No," Ashok said. "But I've seen the other part of that gift. When the spirits won't stop speaking, and the shadows move constantly, so you don't know what's real and what isn't. I walked in that world for a time, and the terror of the place almost destroyed me. It haunts my dreams even now."

Sree glanced away, and Ashok saw the look of grief and regret that marked her features.

"When I drove the knife into her, up to the moment I saw the look of hatred in her eyes, I thought I was doing right," Sree said. "I thought she wanted the kind of peace that only death could bring. She might be terrified for an instant, but then I imagined she would thank me for ending her suffering."

"But she didn't," Ashok said.

"I see the look of hatred she turned on me every time I close my eyes," Sree said. "I betrayed her. There is no forgiveness for me. The spirits show their hatred by attacking what I love—this village and the people I've spent my life protecting. All I have left is to train the child. Elina is the future of our sisterhood. I will teach her to use her gifts and become an othlor. When I've accomplished my task, I

will join Yaraella in death. No one will be quicker than me to enact punishment on that day.”

Ashok believed her, but it wasn’t enough. “I won’t let you kill Ilvani.”

Sree shook her head. “It’s too late. The poison I put in that vial has already infected your blood. Your companions will think you faded.”

Ashok stepped toward her. He rattled his chain. “I don’t feel any pain,” he said. “Your poison isn’t very effective.”

She gave him a look of pity. “We stand in the realm of the spirits. The witches may bide here for a time, and your Ilvani, too, but it’s no place for you, save in death.”

Ashok stiffened. “You’re lying,” he said automatically. “The ritual—”

“Is happening as we speak,” Sree said. “I can feel the presence of my sisters, the power of the circle. I feel Ilvani too. When I take her, I swear to you it will be fast and painless, just as your death was.”

“No,” Ashok snarled. He took another step forward.

“You can’t harm me here, Ashok,” Sree said, but Ashok saw the uncertainty in her eyes. It gave him hope. His limbs trembled with suppressed anger. He let one end of his chain drop to the raft and snapped the other to strike at Sree’s face.

“Let’s find out,” he said.

The witch dodged the blow but not completely. A red line appeared on her right cheek, and a thin stream of blood ran down her face. She pressed one hand to the wound, and her eyes filled with fury.

“I should have known a creature of shadow would cling to this realm tooth and claw. I’ll see you dragged to the void!” She threw up her hands and spoke words filled with power.

Lightning struck the lake and gathered into a blinding ball that rolled across the surface of the water. Sree clenched her fists, and the ball split and took on the shape of two great

hawks—birds made of lightning that swooped down upon Ashok.

Out of instinct, Ashok fell into a crouch and raised his chain. He realized, too late, that metal was the worst defense against such magic. The birds struck him in the chest and legs. His muscles trembled uncontrollably as waves of pain rolled through his body. His heart stopped beating—he couldn't catch his breath until the white fire rolled through him and dissipated.

Ashok fell heavily on the raft. The pain sharpened his wits, but the lightning still affected his muscles. His body wouldn't respond when he tried to push himself up. All he could do was curl into a ball as the witch strode toward him, her hands outstretched.

"Some spirits still answer my call," the hathran said with renewed confidence. "I am the protector of hearth and home, and I have fire too."

Ashok managed to roll onto his back. He met Sree's eyes, but then his vision filled with the flames descending from her hands.



Ilvani opened her eyes and found herself in the heart of the storm.

She stood on the raft while the water churned and lightning split the sky. She felt the shock of it in her breast. The sky was black and starless, a void that centered on the lake and moved toward her, swallowing everything in its path.

Yaraella's monster, Ilvani thought, the force that denies us both peace.

She looked down, and her heart leaped.

The child Elina crouched beside her, a tiny speck in the violence. Ilvani reached for the girl, meaning to put herself between Elina and the storm. The child squirmed away from

her grasp and pushed instead toward the heart of the storm, her arms outstretched and eyes full of desperate longing.

In that instant, Ilvani understood everything, and cursed herself for a fool.

Grabbing the child by the arm, Ilvani dragged Elina behind her. Thunder roared across the lake, deafening her, but Ilvani watched the black void descend upon her without fear.

“Little snow rabbit,” she said. “You had more power than I thought.”



Ashok rolled away from the flames, though he smelled his own charred hair and flesh. Again he absorbed the pain—the flames did not burn as hot as those in the nightmare. He laughed aloud.

“Poor, insane creature.” Sree’s voice followed him as Ashok crawled to the edge of the raft to put the flames out in the water. “Haven’t you had enough of pain and suffering? Why won’t you lie down and let the shadows claim you?”

Ashok bent over the side of the raft. A flicker of movement in the deep waters caught his attention. Human shapes rose up all around the raft, floating toward the surface, long pale hair drifting around their beautiful feminine faces. Ashok thought he heard whispers coming from the water.

They were the voices of the spirits—Ilvani’s whisperers.

“You don’t understand,” he told Sree mockingly. He rolled onto his back to extinguish the flames. “You’re not one of our people.”

“Thank the gods for that,” Sree said. She raised her hands again, but a sudden explosion of water extinguished the fire that rolled from her hands. The lake spirits rose up—Ashok counted at least five of them—and snatched at Sree’s hair and cloak. Hissing and cooing, they dragged her across the raft.



“No, wait! I must—” The hathran’s screams echoed in Ashok’s ears. She hurled fire at random. The lake spirits hissed in pain. Two of them dropped back into the water. “I must finish my task!”

Ashok whipped his chain out. The end snagged Sree’s arm. Her casting disrupted, the witch fell to her knees under the weight of the spirits.

“How does it feel to have them clawing at you?” Ashok said. Ruthless, he pulled his end of the chain. Off balance, Sree stumbled to the edge of the raft.

Her eyes wide with shock and terror, she focused on Ashok an instant before the telthors pulled her into the lake. They dragged her beneath the churning water.

Exhausted and trembling, Ashok closed his eyes. He didn’t have the strength to fight them if the telthors decided to take him too. A breath later, he heard the spirits dive back into the depths of the lake. The water from their passing fell on Ashok’s face.

Ilvani, he thought, as his awareness started to fade, the path is clear now. Tempus, grant her peace.

Ashok felt a burst of bitter amusement, that his final thoughts should include Tempus after all. Uwan would be pleased.



“Enough,” Ilvani shouted at the void. “I know your name now—bitterness, rage, pain. Face me and answer for what you’ve done.”

Lightning struck the raft at Ilvani’s feet, throwing her back. The force tore Elina from her—the child cowered at the raft’s edge, terrified. In the wake of the lightning, the void shrank back, and Yaraella stepped onto the raft.

Her hair was wild, and a bloodstain covered the front of her dress. Something of the void lingered in her eyes, turning them black and fathomless like a shadar-kai’s.

"It's done," she said, her voice full of such dark satisfaction that Ilvani shuddered. This was not the same woman she had encountered in the pinewoods. Hatred consumed this twisted creature. "I felt her die. Now we can be together, the three of us."

"You were the monster," Ilvani said. "No spirit prevented you from passing on from this world."

"You're right," Yaraella said. "I stretched out my hands, and you took them. You anchored me to the world—you and Elina." Her gaze rested on her child, and the shift in her emotions was stunning. Her face filled with love and tenderness that for an instant transformed her into a pure soul. But Ilvani wouldn't be fooled again. She knew the threat Yaraella posed now.

"You used my hands for your vengeance," Ilvani said. She discovered her voice was strangely calm, remote. "Your hate burst out of me and the child and corrupted all it touched. It was my fault," she said, looking down at her hands. "I didn't know how to see through you. What will you do now, snow rabbit? You have no one left to hate."

"I will live on in my child and in you," Yaraella said. She went down on her knees and reached out for Elina. "Our spirits are entwined."

Ilvani stepped forward to grab the child before she could run to her mother. "It will drive her mad and destroy us just as you've destroyed yourself. You've been here too long, little dead rabbit. You don't have a body to go back to, and this child's is too pure for you."

"Perhaps you're right," Yaraella said, her eyes alight with amusement that sickened Ilvani. "I need a vessel that's already been tainted. What a mad, powerful witch we would make, Ilvani. Wychlaran and shadar-kai—the fey realm and the shadow. No world could hide from us."

At that, Ilvani smiled. Her reaction gave Yaraella pause. "You want to feel a shadar-kai's soul? Little rabbit, that knife wound in your belly was nothing to the kind of pain you'll

know at my touch. You should leave this place while you still know yourself.”

Yaraella lunged at her. Ilvani let her clawlike hands fasten onto her upper arms. Yaraella’s black gaze bored into her. Ilvani calmly leaned forward and pressed her lips against the witch’s.

The Veil between the worlds, she thought, is no more difficult to penetrate than the barrier between souls.

Ilvani ripped open the Veil between them.

“First you’ll feel pain,” Ilvani said against the witch’s mouth. She parted her lips and poured blackfire into Yaraella. “If you don’t fight it, the pain can be the lover’s touch. If you resist ...”

Yaraella’s body trembled. She held on to Ilvani to keep from falling. The blackfire filled her and spilled out of her eyes and mouth. She coughed and gagged and tried to breathe. Her hands went to Ilvani’s throat.

“Pain ... isn’t enough,” Yaraella said, her voice shredded by the fire. She dug her fingers into Ilvani’s throat.

Ilvani reached up and tore the witch’s hands away. She was stronger than the snow rabbit now. “You’re wrong. The pain is everything. You’ll see. My soul is inside you now. You’ll see.”

Yaraella cried out. Ilvani touched the witch’s chest and felt her heart beating a hard, erratic rhythm. Then her awareness narrowed. Her body faded, and she was somewhere else, in the dark.

For a breath, Ilvani faltered. She didn’t know her way. Her soul flew free from her body, absorbed in Yaraella, in the darkness with the touch of the Feywild upon her. She didn’t know this place. What if she lost herself here—trapped and joined to the twisted witch forever? Yaraella would get what she wanted.

Ilvani clenched her hand into a fist and felt an object scrape her palm. In the dark, she couldn’t see it, but she knew what it was—the piece of obsidian Ashok had given

her. The difference between what was real and what wasn't lay with her.

"I'm still Ilvani," she said. She gripped the stone until it pierced her flesh. The blood flowed like cleansing water. Ilvani let herself go, screaming as she released the pain and the blackfire in a wild rush.

She heard Yaraella's answering cry of anguish, but she didn't relent. Her awareness was everywhere. Her soul overwhelmed Yaraella, tearing her apart as the wychlaran had tried to shatter Ilvani.

"This is a shadar-kai soul," Ilvani said. "Only a shadar-kai can survive the pain."

When it was over, Ilvani was a long time coming back to herself. She gathered up every piece of her soul, drawing them in protectively to the small light that was her essence.

She was Ilvani, with souls and boxes of memories. Her flesh was the box. All she had to do was keep the box safe, the lid closed.

All the while, she felt Elina's presence, distant yet always beside her. But when she awoke, the little girl was gone. She was still on the raft, and she felt that the bonds of the ritual still held her.

Why? Ilvani thought. Why hasn't the circle been broken?

Panic seized her. Had she truly banished Yaraella, or was she still here, holding Ilvani captive?

Then she saw him on the lakeshore—the reason she was still here.



Ilvani kneeled next to Ashok's lifeless body. She clutched the obsidian stone—her lifeline. It had their blood on it, hers and Ashok's.

His eyes were closed. His scarred face looked more at peace than she'd ever seen it. She reached out her free hand, her fingers hovering above the skin of his face, his

neck, and chest. Shadows bled from his body and encircled her hand.

In a violent motion, she hurled the stone away and tried to grasp the dim vapor with her hands. There was no way to hold it. Her hands were useless again, always useless.

"It's too easy," Ilvani whispered. Tears ran down her face, but she barely felt them. Her body was frozen. She couldn't breathe under the weight of the ice. Playfully, mockingly, the shadows lingered at her fingertips, but when she moved, they scattered. Even her breath drove them away.

She looked up and saw a figure striding toward her across the vast nowhere realm. He had to walk a long way, but when Ilvani saw his face at last, the ice tightened around her heart. Another moment and it would crush her.

"Brother," she said in a voice dredged up from the deep, frozen sea.

"Well met, Ilvani," Natan said. The cleric kneeled in front of her, with Ashok's body between them. He touched Ashok's chest, and more of the shadows drifted away. "You shouldn't linger here, Sister. Living people aren't welcome."

"Why did He let it happen?" Ilvani asked, her voice trembling.

Natan said gently, "Why don't you ask Him?"

"No."

He sighed. "Still stubborn. But you've come far, Sister, and I'm proud of you. You're becoming what you were meant to be."

"What was *he* meant to be?" Ilvani said, looking down at Ashok's dead face. "A shadow in the void?"

Natan's expression was full of sorrow. "Part of him wanted this, Sister—he welcomed it. Now that Ashok has seen it, a part of him thinks the void is inevitable. Death is the only certainty, so he embraced it harder than ever so the fear of it would not destroy him."

"Too easy," she repeated in a hard voice. "Tempus must claim him."

Mild surprise lit Natan's face. "Are you asking on his behalf?"

"I shouldn't have to!" Ilvani cried. "The gods don't need my plea."

"Tempus does," Natan said. "He cannot claim Ashok because Ashok shuns the gods. No one can touch his soul—"

"Then I claim it," Ilvani said. "By the Veil between this world and all others, I will keep his soul for him, until he decides where it belongs."

"You don't have the power to change his fate," Natan said. "Don't you remember your own words, Sister?"

"Then what's the purpose!" Ilvani clenched her hands into fists and watched the shadows fly from her. "Why do I hear the whispers in the dark? Why do the spirits, the telthors, and the hateful ghosts pluck at me? What's the purpose of making me see things that burn my eyes if I can't change their fates?"

Natan closed his eyes. A light suffused his skin and flushed the gray color golden. He was so beautiful, his scent so warm and real that Ilvani wanted to bury herself in it and fade away. When he opened his eyes, he looked content, full of something that blossomed from deep within him. Ilvani knew that look well. In life, he'd worn it every time Tempus spoke to him in a vision. The rapture was all the more intense in death. Natan was with her and yet far beyond her reach—he was at one with his god. She felt joy for him and at the same time an intense hatred and envy of Tempus.

"There is a price for what you ask," Natan said.

"I'll pay it," Ilvani said immediately.

Natan sighed. "You were always reckless, Sister."

I have nothing left to be afraid of, Ilvani thought. "What does Tempus ask?"

Natan's expression softened. "He wants you to be whole—to know that when you're alone in the dark, you don't have to hear the whispers unless you wish to. There are ways to silence the shadows, Ilvani, to see the deceptions in the

void. The witches know. Tempus wants you to learn from them. You must find the strength to stand on your own for what's to come."

She read the sadness in his eyes and understood. "You won't come to me again, will you?"

"I'm sorry," her brother said. "You have everything you need, Ilvani. This last thing I can do for you, I do with joy."

Ilvani looked down. Natan held his hands out to her across Ashok's chest. She clasped them, and the sensation almost broke her, it hurt so much. She let one choked sob escape and bent to kiss his knuckles.

"I miss you," she said.

"And I you."

The golden light filled Ilvani's hands. She looked up. Natan was gone, but the light spread from her hands to Ashok's body and trapped the shadows.

Finally, Ilvani thought. Souls were precious as memories and as insubstantial. But for this one moment, she held them in her hands. She wouldn't let them fly away.

She flung her arms wide to gather all the shadows.



Ashok awoke to warmth and disorienting silence. He was lying on the raft in the middle of the witch's circle. Sree was gone. The landscape—the lake and surrounding forest—was serene and quiet.

Logically—if he could use the word—he knew he was dead, that this was some sort of spirit world, a mirror of Rashemen, but he wasn't afraid. This was nothing like the realm of shadows where his father and brothers waited for him. And he wasn't alone.

Ilvani lay asleep beside him, her head resting on his chest.

Ashok didn't move, not wanting to disturb her peace. He felt her warm breath on his skin as she slept. The sky above them was full of slowly moving stars, turning and turning inward toward an inevitable vortex. They flashed red and

blue, and they blazed brilliant white against the black field. Beneath the spiral, the moon rose, its crater face spilling milk white pools like waterfalls on the ground. Ashok felt utterly peaceful, but he wasn't afraid of the sensation. His soul had never felt so fully a part of his physical form—whole and inviolate.

He wondered vaguely how long they would stay in this mirror world. Not long, perhaps, and in a sudden flash of knowledge, Ashok understood that he wouldn't remember this other realm, its moon, and its gently flowing stars. Nor would he be able to recall this sensation of completeness. He wondered if this was the mythical Feywild spoken of by the witches. Or was he truly dead? Had he shed the physical realm completely to become a pure soul?

But Ilvani was there, an anchor in the peaceful, surreal landscape. Maybe she would be able to explain what it all meant. He was too tired to think about it now, so he let his eyes close. Just before he drifted off to sleep, he felt Ilvani's hand touch his own. His fingers brushed her skin and the edges of a stone clutched in her palm. He held on to both and slept.



Ilvani awoke from the ritual to violence.

The treants came out of their madness, but not in time to stop their children from destroying the raft and breaking the ritual circle. Ilvani had the sensation of falling and heard the cries of the witches a breath before the lake swallowed all sound.

The freezing water shocked her back to full awareness. She fumbled at the clasp of her long cloak. The weight of the saturated fabric and chains threatened to drag her down, but she ripped the garment over her head and thrust it away.

She started to claw her way to the surface, when she sensed a presence near her in the water. It could have easily



been an enemy, but something told her it wasn't. Without thinking, she dived down and swam. The presence grew more distinct, and Ilvani reached out in the darkness.

She grasped a handful of wet wool, hair, and skin. A feeling of familiarity overwhelmed her. She remembered grasping Yaraella's arms in her dreams, trying futilely to keep her from the storm's grasp. Each time, she'd failed to save her. But she could save Yaraella's child.

Ilvani pulled the girl against her chest and kicked toward the surface. The freezing water deadened her sense of touch. When her head finally broke the surface, Ilvani could barely feel the child she clutched in her arms.

She swam toward the dock, but her strength flagged. When she thought she would go under, hands caught her and hoisted her out of the water. She made out the dim outline of the dock by the torchlight. Someone spoke, and more hands came and took the child from her limp grasp.

Blankets fell on her, the heavy, warm weights settling against her skin and lulling her into a half sleep of exhaustion. Voices echoed above her—sometimes she could understand them, sometimes not.

"Are they all out of the water?"

"Yes, but at least one didn't survive the ritual."

"Who?"

"The hathran Sree. Agny is tending to the rest. Her magic won't let them freeze to death."

"Then our duty is to see to our own fallen."

Ilvani thought she recognized the voice of the Rashemi warriors. She fought against unconsciousness, tried to speak, but her teeth chattered uncontrollably.

"What of the shadar-kai?"

"They live; they can see to themselves."

"One didn't. I saw his corpse."

Laughter sounded. "Your eyes deceived you. The corpse walks and breathes. He's treating the others' wounds."

Ilvani relaxed and stopped trying to speak. Ashok lived. Yaraella's child lived. She thought she could ignore the voices now and sleep.

## EPILOGUE

**I**N THE WAKE OF THE RITUAL, THE RASHEMI LEFT THE SHADAR-KAI to themselves while they gathered to mourn Sree's death. Ashok didn't know how he survived the witch's poison, but since he had, and knowing Ilvani had come out of the ritual whole and freed from Yaraella's influence, Ashok decided to tell only Agny about Sree's betrayal and Yaraella's murder. She in turn could one day tell Elina, when the child was ready to bear the truth.

Beyond that, in Ashok's eyes there was no justice left to seek. Sree paid for her crime, and according to some cryptic remarks made by Ilvani, Yaraella's vengeful spirit had moved beyond the concerns of this world.

The morning after Sree's burial, Ashok found Ilvani sitting beside the lake. Wrapped in his cloak—he didn't remember her taking it again—she shivered against the wind coming in off the lake. Ashok sat down beside her. They didn't speak for a long time. Ashok tapped the ice-covered surface of the shallows with his knuckles, watching the cracks spider out toward the middle of the lake.

Finally, he couldn't bear the silence any longer.

"I don't remember all of it," he said. "But you were there, this time. Weren't you?"

"Yes," she said. Her voice sounded rough, as if she'd been asleep.

"What happened?"

From the depths of his cloak, she exposed her hands, cupped them, and examined the scars on her arms.

"Not so useless," she said. "My hands. I touched ..."

"What?" Ashok said.

She hesitated, but then pulled her hands back inside his cloak. "The whispers are quiet now. The telthors are respectful. They know when to be still."

"That's good," Ashok said. He was disappointed that she wouldn't say more about what had happened to him in the

spirit realm, but he didn't press her. "The caravan won't return for many days. Skagi and Cree are in favor of meeting them between here and Thesk. They're restless to be gone from Rashemen."

She stared out over the lake and didn't reply. Ashok thought he'd done something to anger her.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

Her answer pained him, but Ashok dutifully started to rise. She clasped his wrist to stop him. The touch surprised him. He looked at her questioningly.

"Yes, I want you to leave Rashemen," she said slowly. "Go without me."

"No." The word came out before he'd even had a chance to think. She wasn't making sense again. "Ilvani, we can't leave you here by yourself."

She scoffed at that. "I'm never alone, not in this world or any other."

"That's not what I meant."

"You meant this land is dangerous. You mean the witches won't accept me. They don't like me. It's all the truth, but it doesn't matter. They've agreed to a bargain. It's done."

"Done?" Ashok looked at her incredulously. "When?"

"While you slept," Ilvani said. "I spoke to"—she hesitated again—"Agy and Reina. They will teach me to silence the whispers, to control where my mind strays. In return, I'll help them prepare Yaraella's child for her future. If they understand what I see, they will help her to cope with what she sees. The bargain is made."

Ashok didn't know what to say. "All this while I slept," he said faintly.

"You needed time to heal," Ilvani said. She added, "You still do."

"I get no part in this decision?" Ashok said, a petulant note in his voice.

"You'll have to argue with Tempus," Ilvani said. A rare flash of humor lit her black eyes. "Those disagreements rarely end in your favor."

"Did he send you a vision?"

She shook her head. "I didn't ask for that."

"Then what—"

"He wants me to be at peace," Ilvani said simply. "The witches are the way."

"How long will you stay?" Ashok asked.

"For as long as I'm tolerated," Ilvani said. "Or until Ikemmu calls me back. Not more than a season, I think."

The wind picked up, and she clutched the cloak tighter around herself. Ashok looked at her slender hands and small, shivering form. How could she survive up here in the cold North, so far away from the place where she was born? Who would protect her?

As if she could read his thoughts, Ilvani said, "You should worry about yourself. Do you want to live or die, Ashok?"

She so rarely called him by his name. Ashok couldn't remember the last time he'd heard her use it. He read the seriousness of her gaze. She expected an answer. "Does it matter?" he said.

His reply made her unhappy. Ashok saw it in the way she shrank from him and dipped her chin inside his cloak. "He was right," Ilvani said, sighing.

"Who was right?"

"Is that the path, then?" Ilvani said. She seemed to address the question to herself. "To embrace life before anything after can be considered? We have to mend ourselves?"

"Ilvani, I'm sorry, but I don't understand," Ashok said, frustrated. He still had so much to learn about her, yet now she was asking him to go.

"You will," Ilvani said. "Have faith."

It was Ashok's turn to sigh. "Why does everyone ask that of me? Why do they try to push me toward one god or

another?"

A faint smile touched her lips again. "Not faith in the gods—in yourself and your friends."

She seemed so sure of herself. Ashok wondered if he was seeing a glimpse of the person she was meant to be, a woman free of the shadows of the past. They both had long roads ahead of them, but for now, Ilvani's peaceful expression calmed some of Ashok's uncertainties.

"Why did you come to me?" he asked her. "In that place ..." Why was it so hard for him to remember? "You could have died."

"Why did you help me?" she countered. "Why do you risk death for the brothers, for the humans, for Ikemmu?"

"Because they're worth protecting. They're all I have."

"Yes," Ilvani said. This time she seemed satisfied with his answer. "A choice—one that has nothing to do with the gods."

Ashok considered her words. Mareyn found joy in her goddess, a guide to walk the dark roads by her side. Ashok had found that bond in his companions. He needed nothing else.

"I can have faith in that," he said.

They sat by the lake together, watching the colors drift on the water until the winter sun went down.

**THE END**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jaleigh Johnson lives and writes in the Champaign/Urbana area of Illinois. When she's not sitting in front of her computer creating stories, she enjoys sitting in movie theaters, gardening in her backyard, or gaming in the basement. In addition to the Unbroken Chain series, she is also the author of the F<sub>ORGOTTEN</sub> R<sub>EALMS</sub> books *Mistshore* and *The Howling Delve*.

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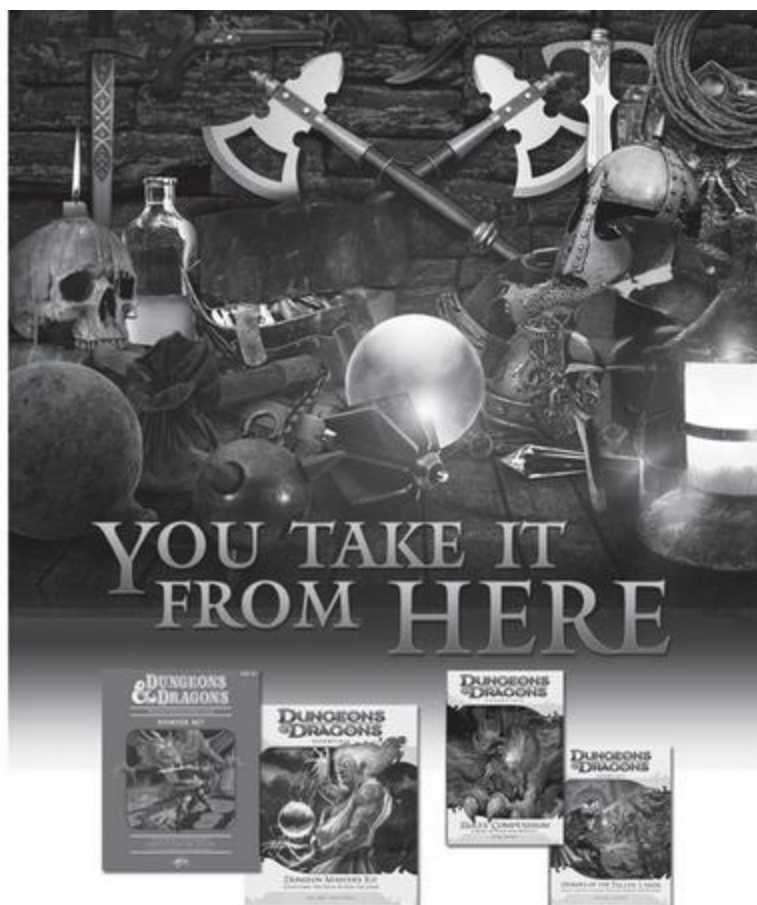
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